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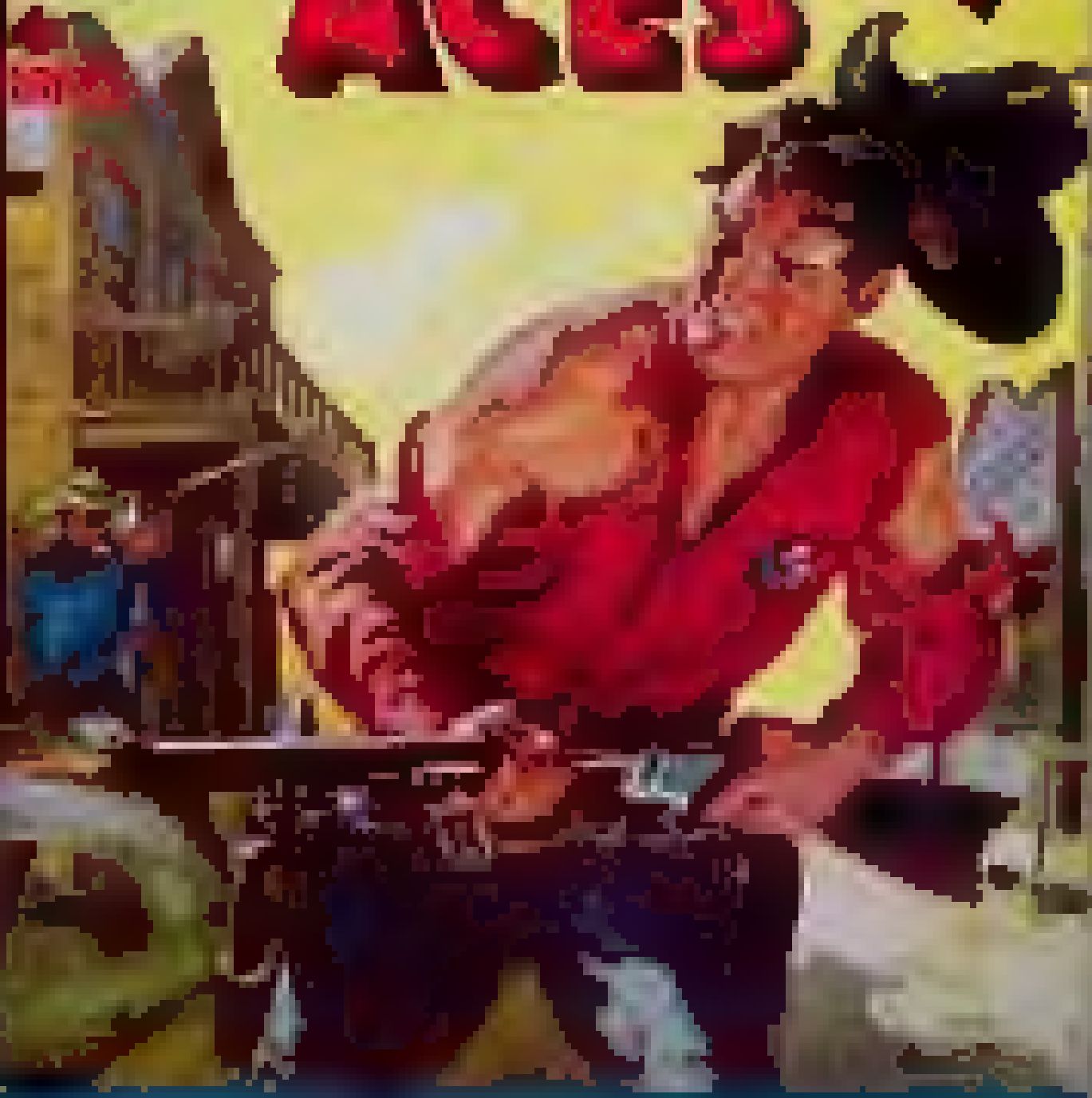
WESTERN ACES



WELSHING GUNS by Clifton Adams

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WESTERN ACES

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Cover by Norman Saunders

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Welshing Guns

Gambler Joe Savoy was as slick with guns as he was with cards. But despite his trigger savvy Joe found himself looking at the wrong end of a .45 flush.

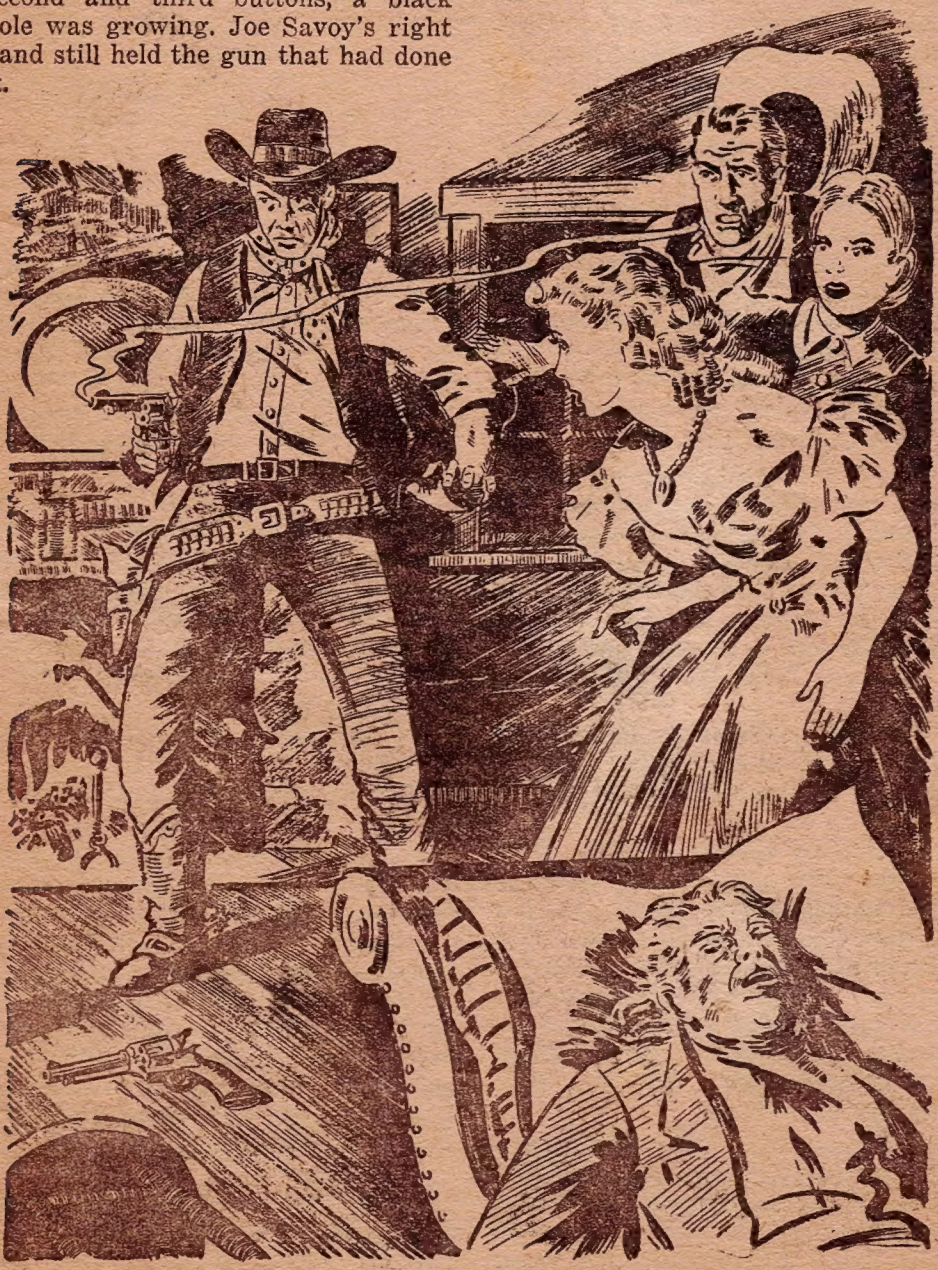
CHAPTER I

JOE SAVOY wiped his hand across his forehead and was a little surprised to see how steady it was. Across the poker table the big man slumped crazily in his chair, his head bent back at a 45-degree angle staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. In the middle of his vest, between the second and third buttons, a black hole was growing. Joe Savoy's right hand still held the gun that had done it.

Gripping Novelette

By Clifton Adams

A few seconds ago oil field workers, cattlemen, and gunmen had been milling and yelling as they pressed four deep along the two bars that



lined the walls of the place. Now the saloon was quiet, dead quiet. There was only the empty clacking of a roulette wheel in the back.

It wouldn't be that way long. You can't kill one man and let it go at that, even though you'd caught him cheating and he'd drawn first. Gunmen have friends, and their friends have more friends, and all of them have guns. Joe Savoy kicked his chair away and took a couple of quick steps to get something solid at his back.

He made it to the bar and glanced around quickly while he kept the house covered. There was a back door behind the roulette wheel. If he was lucky he could make it through the door and to his horse. If he got that far he had a good chance of outrunning anybody that felt like coming after him. It was worth a try. He was ready to do it when a voice said:

"You can drop that gun."

The voice meant business. It came from up above, somewhere. Joe started to jerk around, instinctively, but then his common sense told him that a sudden move now would mean death. He froze to his spot and the saloon started to breathe again.

"The gun," the voice said. "Drop it."

The gun rattled to the floor. There wasn't anything else to do.

"Now turn around."

TURNING around, Joe saw where the voice was coming from. A little balcony affair jutted out over the gambling part of the saloon. Most saloons have them, a place on the second floor for the boss's office and maybe a lookout man for spotting trouble. Joe cursed himself for not thinking of that sooner. But you can't think of everything.

The man behind the voice was a tall, dry-faced hombre, the kind that wouldn't get very excited no matter what happened. He held his gun casually, using it like a pointing finger to help him talk. He nodded down to two men by the bar. "Bat, you and Phoenix bring him up." He glanced at the dead man. "And somebody get that out of here."

The two men separated themselves from the crowd and came forward with their guns out. The one named Phoenix didn't say anything. He was a little sad-faced man with lonesome eyes and not much hair. He wouldn't ever say much. Bat was a big man with angry little eyes of a born killer. He jammed his .45 barrel hard in Joe's ribs.

"Up the stairs, mister. And don't try nothin'—not if you want to get to the top."

Joe saw there wasn't anything else to do, not with two .45s on him. He turned slowly and made for the stairs, the two gunmen behind him. When they reached the top landing the big man said, "All right, mister, in here." He stepped forward, opened the office door, and shoved Joe in.

The tall, dry-faced man tilted back in a swivel chair in front of a roll-top desk and looked at Joe without much interest. Another man, a youngster wearing lace-up boots and flared riding pants sat across the desk with a large sheet of paper spread in front of him. Joe guessed it was a map, but it was different from any other map he had ever seen.

The tall man glanced at the two gunmen. "Wait outside."

There was no doubt who the boss was. The two gunmen slipped out of the room without a sound. For a minute the tall man said nothing. He looked at Joe carefully, noting his big hands, the way his holster hung. He looked at Joe Savoy in the same way a horse trader would look at an animal that he wanted to own. Finally he moved his head an eighth of an inch in the direction of a chair.

"Sit down."

Joe sat down. The youngster in the riding pants seemed a little nervous. He started to fold his map up, but the tall man stopped him with a

glance and then turned back to Joe.

"What's your name?"

"Savoy. Joe Savoy."

The tall man muddled the name in his mind and decided it didn't mean anything to him. "Your real name. A man that handles guns the way you do will have a name that's been passed around."

"It's Savoy, like I said."

The tall man decided not to push it. "All right, Savoy, where did you come from?"

"The border mostly." Joe wondered when they were going to get around to the killing.

"You're a long way from home. Maybe that's the reason I didn't place the name." He hesitated a second, then smiled the faintest smile in the world. "Savoy, you just killed one of my best men. Good gunmen are hard to come by. In a business like mine a good gunman is just as important as a good geologist, like Bonner here."

"He pulled first," Joe said. "There were plenty of witnesses down there, if the law wants to take a hand in it."

THAT got another humorless smile from the tall man. "Those witnesses don't mean a thing, Savoy. But, then, law doesn't mean much either here in Oklahoma Country. A man has to be kind of a 'law unto himself,' as the saying goes."

What the tall man meant was that he was the law. All the law he wanted. He was judge, jury, and maybe executioner—and Joe Savoy was on trial.

"You see what I mean, Savoy? It's mostly up to me, what's to be done with you."

"I see," Joe said. He knew then that he had something the tall man wanted. It was just a matter of waiting until it came out. The tall man got up from his chair, walked over to the big double windows of his office and threw them open.

"Look out there, Savoy. What do you see?"

A thicket of squat, wooden derricks on the slope of a red clay hill. The sweetish smell of oil and gas came into the room. There was the monotonous thumping of walking beams, and the cursing and cracking of bull whip as teamsters formed an endless chain of wagons hauling drilling equipment up the hill. The tall man closed the windows and came back to his chair.

"Oil Valley," he said. "They don't call it that for nothing, Savoy."

Joe Savoy waited. It was coming now, whatever the tall man had on his mind.

"Like I say, you just did away with one of my best men. I'm going to need somebody to take his place and I'm offering you the job."

There wasn't any alternative, they both knew that. Either he took the job or the tall man would go to work enforcing his own law. Joe waited a few seconds, then said, "Maybe you'd better tell me about the job."

The tall man smiled a satisfied little smile. "Lou Barrett," he said. "That's me. It's a name you'll hear a lot here in the valley." He nodded at the young man sitting stiffly across the desk. "This is Mr. Bonner. Mr. Bonner is what they call a geologist back East."

The young man nodded and looked as if he would rather be somewhere else.

"Maybe I'd better start at the first," the man called Lou Barrett said. "I came to Oil Valley after the discovery had been made. As the result of being late I failed to get in where the big money is." He jerked his head toward the derricks outside. "Then I got an idea. Bonner, you can tell him about that."

The geologist was on sure ground now. He smoothed his map, took out a pencil and traced lightly over a series of curved lines. "When I came to Oil Valley I found that it was just that, an oil valley. Here"—he drew

through the peaks of the curved lines —"is where the town lies. On either side"—he made dots on both sides of the descending curves—"is a ridge, or rimrock, that dips away from the valley in all directions. To the geologist that means that the town of Oil Valley is sighted on a 'closed dome' or a 'closed structure'—and, in this case, a producing structure."

To an oil man, it might be interesting. To Joe Savoy it meant nothing.

Bonner drew a line along one slope of his curve. "Here is where they are drilling now. For some reason they started drilling on the anticline, or the peak of the dome, and worked down the structure, and no more oil will be found in that direction."

JOE SAVOY failed to see what it had to do with his new job. He looked at the map and said, "So they start drilling in the other direction and get more oil. What has that got to do with me?"

Lou Barrett smiled quietly. "That's where the catch is. Two families have that land leased from the Indians—the Garners and the Metcliffs. . . . Are you beginning to see where you come in?"

It was an old story. The ranchers did it to the nesters, the rich to the poor, the strong to the weak. "You mean the Garners and the Metcliffs ought to move," Joe said.

"Buy their lease, run them out, or use your guns. That's the job I'm offering to you."

Barrett was out with it now. He sat back in his chair and waited for Joe to think it over. But there really wasn't much to think over; he either took the job or had Barrett's gunmen to deal with.

"If it's money you're worried about," Barrett said, "the pay is good." He fished a key out of his vest pocket and unlocked a drawer to his desk. "Bonner will tell you. Anybody that works for Lou Barrett gets paid good. Isn't that right, Bonner?"

The geologist squirmed uncomfortably and looked as if he were wishing for his teaching job back at some university. "Sure—sure," he said. "The pay is good."

"I'll look it over," Joe said. There wasn't anything else he could do with the two gunmen just outside the door.

"Of course," Barrett said pleasantly. "Do that. In the meantime you might need some of this." He took a layer of new bills from the desk drawer and handed them to Joe. "Go on, take it. You'll need it—just in case Garner decides to sell."

Joe took it. That bought him. No matter what he decided now, he was bought and paid for, and both of them knew it. "Take a couple of days to look it over," Barrett said. Then his face took on that blank look that meant business. "But don't take too much time. I want that land."

Joe put the money in his shirt pocket without counting it. Slowly something started working in the back of his mind, something about those two families Barrett had mentioned. Garner, that was the name that kept nudging him.

He moved that name around in his mind for a minute. "This Garner that you mentioned, that name is familiar."

Another of those smiles from Barrett. "Syd Garner? Yeah, he's got a name as an ex-marshal. It's not easy to find a gunman that'll go up against a man like that." The smile widened. "That's the reason the pay is so good."

The interview was over. Barrett raised his voice just a little.

"Bat. Phoenix."

The door opened almost immediately and the two gunmen came in.

"Boys, this is Mr. Savoy. Bat, give him his gun, he's working for us now."

The big gunman stared at his boss. He hadn't expected a turn like this, and he didn't like it.

"The gun, Bat," Barrett said patiently.

Those angry little eyes flashed, but he came forward and slapped the butt of the .45 in Joe's hand hard enough to break a bone. Joe took the gun and slid it into his holster. "Thanks," he said. He walked past the two gunmen, out of the office and down to the saloon.

CHAPTER II

THE dead man was gone. Four more men were sitting at the table, and the only evidence of a gunfight was a half-breed working with a wet mop.

Joe walked through the crowded saloon as the men pushed back to give him plenty of room. Evidently a man who worked for Lou Barrett commanded respect. He pushed through the batwings up front, and for a minute he stood outside on the board walk and looked at the thumping derricks on the slope of the hill.

Syd Garner . . . that name kept working in the back of Joe's mind. It wasn't going to be an easy job, pushing a man like that off his own land. Then Joe Savoy grinned to himself and fingered the thick fold of bills in his shirt pocket. It wasn't going to be an easy job for somebody, but he made up his mind that that somebody wasn't going to be Joe Savoy. He was a gambler, not a gunman. He worked his .45s when he had to, but he had never hired them out and he didn't figure to start now.

Joe felt his grin widen. He still hadn't counted the money that Barrett had given him, but he could tell by the feel that it was a good stake—good enough to make his short stay in Oil Valley a profitable one. All he had to do was get his horse, ride south out of the Territory and let Barrett figure out another way to take care of Syd Garner and the Metcliffs. It was easier than gambling, making money this way. With his mind made up, he rushed down the board walk in the direction of the livery stable.

"My horse," Joe said. "A little red I left here about an hour ago."

The liveryman went over him with careful eyes and picked his teeth with a piece of straw. He was a little man with a face the color of a slab of beef, and with about as much expression. "I guess you're Barrett's new man," he said finally.

Word got around fast in Oil Valley. But it didn't make any difference, now that Joe was ready to get out. "Could be, Pop. How about the horse?"

The liveryman walked back to the stalls and came back with the little red. The horse was saddled and ready to go.

"You work fast, Pop." Joe fished some silver out of his pocket and gave it to the little man. "How did you know I'd be ready to pull out?"

The liveryman shrugged. "I don't ask questions, mister. When Barrett says have your horse ready I have him ready."

Joe was beginning to understand what Barrett had meant when he said, "It's a name you'll hear a lot here in Oil Valley." Well, he wouldn't be hearing it long. In two days he would be out of the Territory and in Texas, where the name of Lou Barrett didn't mean a thing.

"The Garners and the Metcliffs have their spread up north of town," the liveryman said. "About an hour's ride. Barrett said you'd want to know that."

Barrett had done right well. He hadn't missed a thing. Joe said, "Thanks," got on his horse, and rode out of the stable.

IT WAS just on a hunch that he headed north. In case Barrett had somebody watching. He rode slowly through the short main street, and then onto the dusty wagon road leading up to the derricks. It wasn't a good road to travel, but the dust would make it easier to get away, in case somebody was tailing him.

Nothing happened. The dust shielded him until the wagons wound up in the midst of the thumping wells and stopped. He had to depend on speed now to get him over the hill and out of sight. Joe dug his spurs into the little red horse and they spurted up the hill, dodging grease-crusted slush pits and derricks until they had topped the crest and dropped over on the other side.

From then on it was easy. Joe looked around to see if anybody had spotted him. They hadn't. Then he eased the little horse down to a slower gait and pulled him around to the south. Oil Valley had been a good town for a gambler. But it wasn't good enough to risk getting tied up with a man like Barrett.

Then Joe Savoy grinned. He reached up and fingered Lou Barrett's money again and laughed, long and loud. "Mr. Barrett, I'll drink a toast to you — just as soon as I make it to Texas." Due south there was a narrow pass between two hills of rock and scrub oak. Joe patted his horse's neck and headed for the pass, still laughing.

The man seemed to come out of nowhere. He appeared suddenly at the north end of the pass and reined his horse up, as if waiting for Joe to reach him. The rider was a small man, slightly built, slouching heavily in his saddle like an Indian. He wasn't an Indian. When Joe got closer he could see a shock of sun-bleached hair that showed under the rider's pushed back hat. There was a pale face that would never tan, and pale eyes that seemed almost white, and a mouth so thin that it was hardly a mouth at all. The rider waited until Joe had almost reached the mouth of the pass, then he moved his horse around to block the way.

"You headed somewhere, Savoy?" The thin mouth hardly moved.

Joe pulled his horse to a stop. It was either that or push the stranger out of the way—and in this country you didn't push people around unless you're sure of what you're doing. Joe looked the rider over carefully. He paid particular attention to the heavy .45s tied gunman-fashion just above the knees. The guns looked much too heavy for a man that size to carry—but, then, you can't always tell about that. Billy the Kid was a little man, too.

"You seem to know my name," Joe said.

"Yeah. I know it."

"I'm not much good at remembering faces. Maybe we met somewhere before."

"No. You just killed a friend of mine."

He said it quietly, almost whispered it, without any emotion whatsoever. The dead gambler's friends—Joe had known that he would run into them somewhere, sooner or later. It looked as if it were sooner. He let his horse switch around just a little, to give him a better position in case the little gunman went for those .45s.

FOR a minute it was quiet. The only sound was the wind slithering over the dry grass, like the far-away sound of a rattler coiling. There was no way to get out of it. If the gunman wanted to shoot it out here, then they would have to shoot it out. One of the little man's hands moved. Instinctively Joe started for his own .45. The quiet voice froze his hand before it touched the butt.

"I wouldn't do that, Savoy. You wouldn't have a chance." The pale eyes glanced casually up at the hillsides that formed the pass.

Upon the side of one hill Barrett's gunman, Bat, sat holding a saddle gun at Joe's head. He grinned widely as Joe stared at him. Over on the other hill Phoenix sat as quietly as one of the rocks, with a short-barreled carbine across his knees.

Joe said, "Yeah, I wouldn't have a chance." Then, because it was no good putting the thing off, he added,

"It looks like you've got me. What do you figure to do about it?"

The pale face relaxed a little. It even smiled a little. Joe decided that the dead gambler hadn't been such a good friend of the little gunman's after all. He looked more like a man doing a job than somebody out to do some getting even.

"I guess I ought to kill you," the gunman said, almost absently. "But Barrett says no. He says if you get turned around on your directions, we're supposed to put you back on the right track. North."

Barrett again. Joe Savoy had made a mistake, about the worst mistake a man can make in this country—that of underestimating your enemy. Lou Barrett had hired a man for a job. He didn't mean for Joe Savoy to leave Oil Valley until the job was finished—not alive, anyway.

For the first time Joe began to see things clearly. Barrett was giving him a choice. He could try to beat three gunmen, or he could try to beat one gunman, Syd Garner. It wasn't much of a choice.

Joe Savoy knew then that he would have to meet Syd Garner. Some way, he would have to beat him and force the two families out of the Territory. That was the job he was hired for, and that was the job he would have to do—if he wanted to leave Oil Valley alive.

THE pale-faced gunman was waiting. So were Bat and Phoenix up on the hilsides. They were waiting for him to make up his mind, and if he decided on the wrong thing their guns would settle it now and for good. Joe took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I guess I got turned around at that," he said finally. "You can tell Barrett I'm earning my money, that I'm heading north."

"I'll tell him," the little gunman said. "But just in case you get lost again, we'll be around close. Remember that, Savoy. We'll be around close."

Joe almost added, "But not close enough to mix with Syd Garner." But he didn't. It wouldn't be smart, working up hate in those pale eyes. He said, "I won't forget. Have you got a name?"

"Yeah. Passo. Jody Passo."

Jody Passo . . . Savoy had never seen the little gunman before, but he had a name that got around. A name that men used when they spoke of a fast draw, a name with a price on it in three states or more. Joe looked at the little man with a new respect, the kind of respect that has nothing to do with whether or not you like the person. He wondered why Lou Barrett hadn't put Passo on the job If there was anybody who could stand up to Syd Garner and come out alive, Passo would be the man.

It didn't make much sense. Maybe it was a frame. Or, maybe, Barrett figured that a stranger would have a better chance of dealing with Garner than a man with a name, like Jody Passo.

Maybe. There wasn't any answer to it now. Joe Savoy pulled his horse around to the north and rode.

He looked back once and saw that Bat and Phoenix had come down off the hills and were on their horses. They didn't seem to follow him. Joe rode easily for about an hour and he didn't see the three again. Then, suddenly, he knew that they were watching him. They were close by, the way Jody Passo said they would be.

A little feather of dust over beyond a hill: that could be one of them, making sure that he wouldn't get "turned around" again. Off somewhere in the distance there was a little sound, very faint, and as soft as the wind. A horse running—running to get ahead of him and make sure that he didn't leave the trail.

But there was nothing Joe could do about it now. He was hired for a job and they were going to see that he did a good one. He skirted the hill

of derricks that bordered Oil Valley and kept to the north.

When he reached the last derrick in that direction, he knew that he must be on what the geologist had called the "closed dome" of the structure, and on Syd Garner's land. He wasn't sure what to do next, but he was sure of one thing. Off somewhere in the distance, in the hills, or in the brush, Barrett's three gunmen were watching him to make sure that it was right. He rode another half mile before he spotted the rider.

Maybe it was the way the rider sat in the saddle. It was a long way, maybe a mile to the west, but Joe knew that it wasn't an ordinary cowhand, or any Westerner, for that matter. The rider had topped the crest of a hill from the direction of town; now he was heading north pushing his horse at an easy gallop.

Maybe it meant something, maybe it didn't. Joe Savoy wanted to make sure. If Lou Barrett had any more men tailing him he wanted to know about it. He kicked his horse hard and made for the northwest, skirting the hill to keep out of sight.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Joe had reached the other side of the hill he had gained enough distance on the rider to tell more about him. He had been right about the man not being a Westerner. The rider was Bonner, the young geologist whom he had met in Barrett's office.

Joe pulled his horse up and watched. A lot of things went through his mind, but if he wanted any answers he would have to go after the man who had them, Bonner. Joe kicked his horse again and darted across the flat land to cut across the geologist's trail.

Then Bonner saw him. He pulled up for a minute and seemed to debate on whether to kick his horse to a full run or wait. He decided on waiting. He seemed a little surprised when he saw who it was. Maybe the geologist had expected to find Joe with his face in the dirt, digesting one of Syd Garner's .45 bullets. Joe pulled up in front of Bonner and came around to face him.

"How many men does Barrett have on his payroll, anyway? The only men I've seen in this town is Barrett and guys working for him."

"I can't say," the geologist said. "I just work for Barrett, plotting this structure."

"Don't the Garners and the Metcliffs do anything about your poking around on their land?"

"They did—for a while."

"For a while? I had an idea that they wouldn't have much to do with Barrett. Why else would Barrett go to the trouble of getting a stranger like me to do his job?"

Bonner worked on that one, and Joe thought he could see things going on behind those clear eyes. After a few seconds the geologist decided to come out with it.

"Look, Savoy, I saw what happened in Barrett's office today. I've seen the same thing before. If Barrett thinks he can use a man, then he gets the drop on him and forces him to work for Lou Barrett or—" Bonner gave a little shrug. The rest was obvious. "Take my advice and get out of town."

"I took my own advice and tried it," Joe said. "It didn't work. Barrett's gunmen were waiting for me."

"Oh!" Something—maybe fear—widened the geologist's eyes. "What are you going to do now?"

"The same as you're doing. Work for Barrett until I can see my way out." Joe looked the question that was still in his mind. Why did the Garners and the Metcliffs allow Bonner, a Barrett man, on their property?

Bonner must have seen it. He blushed a little and squirmed uneasily in his saddle. "We're both in the same boat, Savoy—we're both working for Barrett because we can't do

anything about it. I guess it won't hurt to tell you something." He tried to get his Adam's apple down to where it was supposed to be. "There's a girl. Ann Metcliff. Barrett doesn't know anything about it, and I'd rather he didn't."

Barrett would know about it soon enough, with Bat and Phoenix and Jody Passo over the hill somewhere watching. But Joe didn't say anything about that. He didn't stop to ask himself why. "A girl," he said, more to himself than to Bonner. "That means that you must be in good with the families. You could take me in and introduce me as a lease man. Maybe that way I could get them to sell."

That look crept into Bonner's eyes again. "No," he said before he thought. "I couldn't. They trust me. What would Ann think?"

IT WASN'T a pretty setup, using young love to worm your way on the inside. But in this case it was somebody's neck if he didn't do it—Joe Savoy's neck. He made that clear to Bonner. As clear as words and a Colt .45 could make it. "I don't like it, but it's got to be done. I've got Joe Savoy to think about. And Barrett might not be pleased if he found that you were on the inside and hadn't done something to get that land for him."

That did it. The geologist's face paled. Joe didn't give the geologist time to think. He jerked his head to the north, in the direction Bonner had been headed. "We'd better be going. You can take me in and introduce me. We'll see what happens from there."

The Metcliff spread was over the next rise, in a valley. There was the usual boxlike ranch house made of logs, and a corral and a small bunkhouse in the back. According to Bonner, the Garner spread was a little to the west of here. The two families had come from Texas and sort of put in together on this cattle project. It wasn't a bad setup, at that. They were close to the shipping point in Kansas, the Indians here were friendly, and the land was good for grazing.

Bonner led the way up to the front of the ranch house—a little reluctantly. They left their horses at the empty hitching rack and started for the front porch. Then Joe saw the big black coming in from the west at an easy gallop. The rider was a big man, riding lightly and easily, the way big men do sometimes.

Joe glanced at Bonner. "It looks like this is the day the Metcliffs get company."

The geologist didn't speak. He seemed to be having trouble again keeping his Adam's apple swallowed. He half turned, as if to get back on his horse.

"Hold it, Bonner." Joe touched the geologist's sleeve. He jerked his head in the rider's direction. "If it's one of Barrett's men, there's no use running. He's already seen you."

"He's not one of Barrett's men," Bonner said. "It's Syd Garner."

"Oh!" For a few seconds Joe stared at the rider, then things started working in the back of his mind. Since he was going to have to meet Garner sometime, it was better to do it now while he had the two families together, and somebody to do the introducing. The big black pulled up at the hitching rack and wheeled in a cloud of dust. Syd Garner swung down from the saddle and came toward them.

On the ground he looked bigger than he had on the horse. He wasn't an old man, not much older than Joe, but the hair along his temples was getting gray, and his eyes were the eyes of a man who had already seen enough to last a lifetime. His famous .45 was an ordinary Colt with an ordinary wooden butt, and Syd Garner wore it as casually as most men wore their pants.

"Hello, Bonner." The ex-marshal looked at them with careful eyes. His

voice was soft, and a little tired, like his eyes. It was pleasant enough, but it wasn't friendly. Joe wondered about that.

"Hello, Garner," the geologist said. He hesitated, a little nervously. "This is Mr. Savoy. A friend of mine from—Fort Worth."

Joe had expected something a little better out of Bonner in the way of an introduction, but this would do. He held out his hand and the big man shook it while he went over Joe with a professional glance. A voice from the front porch called:

"Ray—Syd—come in the house."

Joe turned and got his first look at Ann Metcliff. One look and he couldn't blame Bonner for going out-of-bounds to see her. It didn't mean much just to describe her—brown hair, dark eyes . . . . She looked a little slighter and a little smaller than most women, but that didn't tell what she looked like. Maybe it was her eyes, the straight way she had of looking at you, like the eyes of an honest man. She called again and Bonner and Syd Garner went up to the front porch, Joe following a little behind.

WHEN they were inside, Bonner made the introductions again. This time to Ann Metcliff; to a fat little man with tired eyes and long white hair, who was her father; and her mother, a big, honest-looking woman with the smell of kitchen about her. Joe Savoy was on the inside. He decided to make the best of it by sitting back and learning all he could.

He learned one thing. Syd Garner was in love with Ann Metcliff. It was written all over his big face every time he looked at her. That explained why he didn't take to Bonner very well—that, and the fact that Bonner was working for Lou Barrett.

Joe let the talk go around him for a while and tried to size up the situation. He became aware that the talk wasn't free or comfortable talk, that the geologist and Syd Garner were tense and wound tight, like two dogs agreeing to divide their bone but not liking it.

Meanwhile, Joe was waiting for Bonner to bring up the oil business—to introduce him as a legitimate lease man and give him an entering wedge to bargain with. The geologist sat a little uneasily in a straight chair and did nothing. Then Syd Garner rolled a brown-paper cigarette during a lull and turned to Joe.

"Bonner said you were from Fort Worth. Are you in the cattle business there?"

Joe saw his chance and took it. "The oil business," he said. "Buying leases around Oil Valley for my company."

That got some attention, from the Metcliff side, anyway. Mrs. Metcliff looked up. "Why, you must be the man Mr. Bonner has been telling us about."

That was something to think about. Bonner hadn't seen him until a few hours ago. Joe looked around at the geologist, but those clear eyes didn't tell him a thing.

"Yeah," Joe said. "I'm the one."

Bonner didn't blink.

Mrs. Metcliff laughed. "He says you work for the best company in the oil business. I guess Pa and me was just about to turn our leases over to you. It's a lot of money, like Mr. Bonner says, five thousand dollars just for this piece of land. More than we'd ever make in the cattle here." Then she looked at Syd Garner. "But Syd—Syd has always been right about things like that and—"

Things were happening fast. Faster than Joe Savoy could keep up with. From the looks of things, the Metcliffs wanted to sell their lease—and through Ray Bonner. Then Syd Garner cut in.

"The fact is, Savoy, that we wouldn't mind selling our leases. It takes a lot of money to start drilling. More money than we could raise. Anyway,

Mr. Metcliff and myself are cattlemen, not in the oil business."

If they wanted to sell, why didn't they sell to Lou Barrett? His money spent as well as anybody's. Syd Garner must have seen the question in Joe's eyes.

He put his cigarette out and his naturally serious face got more serious. "Savoy, this is Indian country. The Indians have been pushed around ever since the paleface landed here. Killed in wars and pushed westward until there was no place for them to go. Now, they are finally getting a break. If things are handled honestly a good share of the oil money will go to them. *If* things are handled honestly," he said again.

Whether or not the Indians got their share of the oil money didn't mean a thing to Joe Savoy. But it would to a man like Garner.

"That's the way it is," the ex-marshal went on. "We're ready to sell, but we want to be sure it goes to the right man. Men like Lou Barrett will never get these leases."

Joe wasn't sure just how he stood in Syd Garner's estimation. He decided not to push it. If he set up office in town and looked respectable, then maybe Garner would come to him. If not . . . Joe saw that Lou Barrett had been right about one thing. If they could get Garner out of the way, the rest would be easy.

Joe pushed himself up out of his chair and shook hands around. "Well, think it over, Garner. Come into town and we'll talk it over. And, about the Indians—my company will take care of them."

Barrett would take care of them, all right, but not in the way Syd Garner wanted. The big man hesitated.

"I'll come in," he said finally. "We'll talk it over."

That took care of that. Joe got his hat and followed Bonner outside. There were still some blank spaces in the setup—blank spaces that Bonner could fill in. Joe Savoy meant to see that they were filled in as soon as they were out of sight of the house.

CHAPTER IV

"YOU are sure one to stick your neck out, Bonner." They had been riding for about five minutes, and now they had dropped over a small rise and left the Metcliff house behind them. "Being competition to Syd Garner, and trying to cross Lou Barrett on a lease-buying deal."

The geologist's face seemed to pale. For a minute he said nothing, and then suddenly he blurted, "Look, Savoy, as I said before, we're in the same boat. We both hate Barrett, but we can't do anything about it. Only I *am* doing something about it." The geologist turned and stared levelly at Joe. "I guess it sounds funny, that talk about my lining up an honest buyer for those leases. But it's the truth. I contacted a company in Texas and they gave me the authority to do the lease buying for them."

Bonner spread his hands helplessly. "But that would be too much for even Ann to believe, me buying the leases and working for Barrett. I had to make up this lease man. I didn't have anybody in particular in mind, but now it looks like I have. It's you."

Joe jerked around to see if the geologist had suddenly gone crazy.

"Me!" That was good for a laugh. "Look, Bonner, I do some crazy things sometimes, but I'm not too crazy to know when I'm hogtied. And Barrett's got me hogtied." Off to the east Joe saw a little rope of dust spiral up like smoke from a lonesome chimney. That would be Bat, or Phoenix, or Jody Passo, just making sure that he stayed tied.

The geologist said: "What if Garner sold his lease to you? Do you think Syd would forget a thing like that, when he found out that you were doing the buying for Barrett?"

That had been in the back of Joe's mind, but the odds were still one-to-three. "That's a chance I'll have to take," he said. "We're still doing it my way. One way or another we're going to buy the leases—for Barrett."

For two days nothing happened. Joe used some of Barrett's money to rent a small office and paint a sign on the door: *Westate Development Company.* The rest of the time he spent waiting for Syd Garner. The third day he came.

Joe had been listening to Bonner's plan for the hundredth time and for the hundredth time turning it down, when the knock came at the office door. The ex-marshal came in.

His big face seemed more serious than ever. He held a long brown envelope in one hand and glanced briefly at the geologist.

"Oh, hello, Bonner. I'm glad you're here. What I have to say concerns both of you."

Joe motioned to a chair and the big man sat down. "I guess what I have to say will be a disappointment to both of you," Garner said carefully. "It's not that I distrust you." His eyes called him a liar for that. "It's just that I have been checking on your company for the past two days and I haven't found out anything. None of the oil men know it." He shrugged just a little. "You see how it is."

FOR an instant the room was quiet, except for the sound of Bonner's breathing, and the thumping of the derricks outside. Syd Garner tapped the envelope against one big thumb.

"Today I got a letter from a well-known company in the East. They're sending a man down to look over the land. I've decided to let that company have it."

With that sentence he cut the ground from under Joe Savoy. But, somehow, Joe found that it didn't hit him as hard as he had expected. Maybe it was because he had developed a kind of respect for this big man with the famous gun. Or maybe it was because the deal had been wrong all the time. Working for Barrett—that had never been right. A job is never right when you do it with a gun in your back.

Joe took a long time to answer. He looked at Syd Garner's big face and made up his mind. He wasn't going to push it any farther. Maybe it was because the ex-marshal's face was an honest one, and you don't see faces like that very often. Anyway, Joe knew the job was over. If it meant facing Barrett's gunmen, then that's the way it had to be. In the back of his mind he wondered what the odds would be on outrunning Bat and Phoenix and Jody Passo to the border.

"Well, Garner, I guess that's that." He got up and held out his hand and the big man took it, a little surprised.

"I'm glad you're taking it this way, Savoy. I hope you understand."

"Sure." Joe said, "sure." He was already planning to get his horse out of the livery stable and on the trail. The big man didn't say anything else. He nodded once to Bonner, turned, and went quietly out the door.

"You're a fool, Savoy." Bonner's words were hard. A little too hard, Joe thought, for a man who hadn't lost anything. After all, Bonner wanted the land in the right hands, the same as Garner did. That was the way it was going to be. "Do you know what Barrett's going to do when he finds out about this?"

"I've got an idea. But he's going to have to catch me first."

"He'll catch you," the geologist said. He stood up quickly and walked to the door. "And when he does, I wouldn't want to be in your place." He went out and Joe sat staring at the closed door.

A few minutes went by while Joe let things go through his mind. Slowly, he discarded the idea of pulling out right away and decided to wait for night. If he was going to have Barrett's gunmen on his tail, it would be better to have the protection of dark-

ness. Then, slowly, the way your mind works when you let it run free, he thought of Bonner.

Joe wondered how much interest the young geologist had in those leases. He wondered if Bonner was as harmless as he seemed. Finally, he thought about Lou Barrett.

Three hours passed. Long shadows dropped across Oil Valley's main street. Another hour passed and the sun settled in the west, and the gas torches from the wells beat red against overhanging dust clouds. It wouldn't be long now. In a few minutes it would be dark enough to make a run for it, maybe the last run Joe Savoy would ever make. He got up from the desk, saw to the hang of his gun and waited the few minutes out impatiently.

At last he walked out of the office, stood for a minute in the narrow hallway and listened. There was nothing. He rolled a cigarette carefully and struck a match on the door. *Weststate Development Company*. Another sign could have been added: *Out of Business*. He walked down the short flight of stairs, down to the crowded plank walk that was Oil Valley's main street.

The gas fumes from the wells seemed stronger in the night, and the darkness seemed to amplify the sharp, pistol-like cracks of the bull whips. He watched the endless chain of wagons crawl up the hill into the maze of derricks. He took a good look and hoped it would be his last one. Then Joe Savoy turned and made his way in the direction of the livery stable.

IF BARRETT'S gunmen were on duty, they were staying out of sight. Joe got his horse, and there were no questions asked. It was easy. It was too easy.

He headed north from the stable, hoping that it would fool anybody that might be watching. He went up through the forest of derricks, the same as he had the last time, and then cut to the south. Nobody was following him. He would have spotted them in the glare of the gas torches if they had been. It still seemed too easy.

Joe pushed his horse hard for a few minutes, and then slowed down to peer in the darkness and listen. Then he heard it. Somewhere in the darkness, in a brush of blackjack, or over a hill, a horse nickered.

Maybe a rancher taking a short cut over the hill. Joe didn't think so. He rode on a little farther, slowly. He realized that he was still in the light of the gas torches—that whoever was out there in the darkness could see him. He was a target, a bull's-eye that couldn't see to shoot back. He rode on, slower. A horse moved over to his right. That made two horsemen out there somewhere, and that wasn't good.

Then he saw a form — a dark, shapeless mass straight ahead, that seemed to move forward just a little and then melt away in the night. That made three of them—Bat and Phoenix and Jody Passo. They were somewhere out there in the darkness, waiting. Joe pulled his horse to a stop. If he tried to ride out of that circle of light, he knew what would happen.

He could commit suicide by trying to make a run for it now, or he could turn around and go back to Oil Valley and Lou Barrett. Out there in the night they were giving him his choice.

How had they known that he was going to try to run? If they had tailed him, it would have been different. But they hadn't. They were there waiting for him, as if they had known all along that he was going to try.

Suddenly, Joe thought he was seeing things clear for the first time. Getting out of Oil Valley suddenly lost its importance. He pulled his horse around and kicked hard. There was still a job to do—not the one he had set out to do at first, but a job. If the three gunmen wanted to follow him, it was all right. It didn't make much difference now.

When he hit the main street of Oil Valley, Joe Savoy wheeled his horse in to the hitching rack in front of Barrett's saloon and swung down. Inside, he got one of the bartenders alone.

"Barrett, is he up in his office?"

The bartender went over him carefully before finally saying: "No. He went out a while back."

"By himself?"

"Yeah—no. He had the young punk with him—Bonner."

That was all Joe wanted to know. He went out of the saloon and swung back on his horse. The three gunmen were just coming down the hill. Joe pulled his horse out into the street where they could see him. They could follow him now. He wanted them to.

It was a hard run through the darkness, but Joe had been over the trail once before and that helped. The gunmen were following behind, but not far behind. They weren't being careful about keeping out of sight now.

Just before he reached the slope that led down to the Hetcliff ranch house, Joe saw the body. A crumpled heap thrown on the ground in that rag-doll fashion that always means the same thing. A saddle gun was partly hidden under the heap that was once a man. Joe Savoy didn't stop to inspect the body. He thought he knew who it was and why he had died. He hoped that he would get to the ranch house before somebody else died, but he didn't think he would. It wasn't in the cards.

CHAPTER V

JOE left his sweating horse at the hitching rack without bothering to tie him. In a few running steps he had made the front porch and banged on the door.

He was too late. He saw it in Ann Metcliff's swollen eyes when she opened the door. She let him in without a word, and he saw what he knew he would see, there on a leather-covered couch in the big room.

It could almost pass for the same sagging heap that he had seen up on the slope. It was just as limp, and just as lifeless. But this was a little man, grown a little fat with age, and with long white hair that fluffed up in a slight breeze. Mrs. Metcliff knelt beside her husband and sobbed quietly.

It was no surprise to see death here—but old man Metcliff, that didn't fit. Joe lifted his gaze and looked at the other people in the room. Ray Bonner standing quietly over to one side of the room, with his hat in his hands. Syd Garner, looking beat and old and very helpless. Ann Metcliff, just staring, her eyes wide with shock, not letting herself believe what was actually happening.

"How did it happen?" Joe Savoy's words sounded strange, booming hollowly in the silent room.

The geologist said nothing. After a moment Syd Garner looked up and seemed to notice Joe for the first time. "Barrett," he said. He let that one word explain everything.

"But how?"

Syd Garner took a deep breath and let it out very slowly, as if he carried the weight of the earth in his chest. "From ambush," he said at last. "Up on the slope. It was near dark—I guess he thought he was shooting at me."

Then the big man looked at Ann Metcliff and went on, as if something was forcing him to explain to her why he hadn't done anything. "It happened fast. Just one shot did it. Oh, it was pretty. Barrett figured if he killed me he could buy the leases without much trouble. But he killed the wrong man."

But how about that body up on the slope? It was Barrett, and he was dead. Very dead.

Garner answered that one, as if blaming himself for everything. "I didn't do anything. If it hadn't been for Bonner. I don't know. If it hadn't

been for him, maybe nothing would ever have been done."

Syd Garner, the ex-marshal who had always kept law and order by his big presence and the sight of his famous gun. But this time he had done nothing.

Bonner still didn't move, and there was nothing to be read in his eyes. He stared blankly at the lifeless body on the couch and his thoughts seemed a million miles away.

Joe Savoy glanced around the room. If he was smart he would get out of here and get out of Oil Valley. Barrett was dead. Barrett was the only thing that had been keeping him here.

But he had been forgetting something. Barrett's three gunmen were out there somewhere. They weren't going to like it when they found their boss dead. And there was something else—the thing that had made him turn and come back to the Metcliff spread in the first place. It was none of his business—but then, he had been mixed up in a lot of things that weren't any of his business lately. Joe turned to the big Garner.

"Just like that? Barrett hid in ambush, and when the old man came out he shot him, thinking it was you. Then Bonner comes along, sees it, and gets Barrett."

Syd Garner nodded. "Just like that."

Joe turned to the geologist. "The bartender in town claimed you and Barrett left there together."

BONNER'S mind whipped back to the room, to the present. He jerked his head up and looked at Joe. He thought everything over very carefully.

"Yes," he said slowly, while the eyes of the room turned on him. "We rode out together. Barrett said there was some land he wanted me to look at before it got dark. When we reached the ridge he rode up ahead and told me to wait. He fired. I guess he was going to shoot me too, to have somebody to lay the killing on. But I got my gun first."

"You don't usually carry a gun, do you, Bonner?"

Those clear eyes were getting angry now. "I was riding one of Barrett's horses. A saddle gun is standard equipment on his mounts."

"Was it smart for Barrett to give you a gun if he was planning to kill you?"

"Look here, Savoy, what are you getting at?"

"I meant to get out of town tonight. To try it, anyway. I didn't have much luck because Barrett's gunmen were waiting for me. Somebody told them, Bonner. Somebody wanted them to finish me off for good."

That didn't mean anything to Syd Garner or the others, but it meant something to Ray Bonner. He pulled up stiffly and glanced quickly around the room.

"Say it, Savoy," he said softly. "Say what you've got on your mind."

"You killed him, didn't you?"

The room froze. There was a little gasp from Ann Metcliff, and for a minute that was the only sound. Then Syd Garner turned his serious eyes on Joe.

"You'd better go, Savoy. We've had enough trouble here. Bonner couldn't have done it. It would take a good man with a rifle, a man like Barrett, to kill at that distance with one shot. Bonner wouldn't be that good."

"I didn't mean the old man," Joe said. "I meant that he killed Barrett."

Joe was aware that he wasn't making sense. There was never any question as to who had killed Barrett. "Maybe 'murder' is a better word," he added. "You want me to tell them why, and how, Bonner?"

The geologist's face paled — not much, but enough for Joe to see it, and Syd Garner, and Ann Metcliff. But Bonner held his ground. "You're not making sense, Savoy. Like Syd

says, we've had enough trouble. You'd better go."

Garner made a little motion with his hand. "Just a minute. Maybe you'd better go on and have your say, Savoy. But it had better be good. At a time like this it had better be good."

Joe looked at the ex-marshal. "You wondered why you couldn't find out anything about Bonner's company. That was because it was just that—Bonner's company—one that he had made up to buy your leases. He took a long chance, double-crossing Barrett, but for that much oil he figured it was worth it. The catch was, you wouldn't sell to him.

Bonner tried a laugh, but it didn't come off very well. He took a step back against the wall and reached to his shirt pocket for tobacco. He glanced at Garner.

"He's crazy. He was trying to buy the lease for Barrett. When I wouldn't go along with him he got mad, now he's trying to trump up a murder to pin on me."

Garner looked a question at Joe.

"Yeah, I was working for Barrett. If you can call it working for a man while you've got a gun in your back."

SYD GARNER wasn't at all sure. The geologist toyed with the tag of his tobacco sack and tried to keep his face blank.

"Remember when you came into the office today?" Joe said to Garner. "You had a letter from a well-known company that wanted the leases. Bonner knew then that he was going to have to stop you, and he was going to have to do it before the lease man got here. If he got you out of the way, then he could talk the Metcliffs into selling to him — particularly if he pulled it off to make him look like a hero."

Bonner froze. Syd Garner didn't move, his face told nothing.

"So he told Barrett about your decision with this new company," Joe went on. "He also told Barrett that I was getting ready to make a run for it, so he could get me out of the way. But that's another story. He convinced Barrett that if he wanted those leases he would have to kill you. He led Barrett out here and let Barrett do the shooting—only they got the wrong man.

"Then Bonner killed Barrett with his own saddle gun. That got rid of buying competition and made him a hero in Ann Metcliff's eyes at the same time." Joe looked at the geologist. "Wasn't that the way it happened, Bonner?"

There was a sudden little sobbing gasp from Ann Metcliff. But the men didn't seem to notice. Bonner pressed back against the wall and stared at Garner and Joe.

"He's crazy," the geologist said hoarsely. "He's crazy, Syd. Get him out of here before he starts more trouble."

Syd Garner wasn't sure who was crazy, but those sad, serious eyes meant to find out. He turned slowly and stared at Bonner for a long time. "If I thought that's the way it was," he said softly. He took a deliberate step toward the geologist. "If I thought . . ."

"Stay where you are, Syd." Bonner's mouth pulled tight. "Stay where you are, or so help me—"

Garner took another step. The geologist's fingers dropped the tobacco sack that he had been clutching. His hand plunged inside his shirt and whipped out a brutish little derringer. He did it instinctively and without thinking. He could have talked his way out of this. There was no proof against him. All the evidence was guessing, wild guessing on Joe's part, but things were coming too close to home. When the pressure was put on, his hand took a mind of its own and went for that hideout.

Garner stopped. A man with less experince with guns might have kept going, but Syd Garner knew what that little toy-looking gun could do. At that range it could blast a role in a man the size of a half-dollar, it

could kill and mangle and do damage all out of proportion to its size. Garner stopped.

But there was no question in his eyes now. Joe Savoy had been right. Bonner was aware of his mistake now, and inside he would be cursing himself for a fool. But it was done and he had to go on from there.

"Turn around," the geologist snapped. "Both of you."

He swung the little gun to cover both of them. Joe and Syd Garner turned slowly.

"Now lift your guns carefully, with two fingers and drop them." Bonner wasn't making any mistakes now. He had made one and had shown his hand, but he wasn't making any more. Joe and the ex-marshal lifted their guns carefully and dropped them to the floor. "All right, turn back around."

THEY turned back around. Bonner jerked his head at Ann Metcliff and moved her to the center of the room where he had everybody in range. No more mistakes. Joe stared at the geologist and hardly recognized him. Those clear eyes were as hard and dull as slate. His mouth was pulled so tight that it was hardly a mouth at all. It was more than just the face changing. Bonner was a different man.

"You're smart, aren't you, Savoy?" The thin mouth twitched, but the gun was steady. "You ride into Oil Valley out of nowhere and think you're something big." The thin mouth twitched again. "We'll see how big you are. We'll see if you're big enough to take a bullet from this little derringer."

Syd Garner started to move again, but the little gun stopped him. "You won't get away with it, Bonner. You'll never get out of the Valley."

A tight grin flashed across the geologist's face. "Maybe. But I've got two bullets here. If I miss with one of them, then you're right, I won't get away."

He couldn't miss. At that distance he couldn't miss and he knew it. "I took a long chance and I lost," Bonner said evenly. "But it was worth it. You can afford to take chances for a hundred acres of oil." He glanced at Ann Metcliff's shock-numbed face. He had lost more than just the oil. He looked away quickly.

The geologist was through talking now. He gripped the butt of the little gun tightly and took a step back toward the door. Joe tried to move. Now was the time to do something, anything—and he couldn't move. Bonner made a tight little sound. It might have been a laugh. Joe watched the trigger finger start its squeezing.

The geologist noticed that something was wrong before anybody else did. Maybe it was in the air. Maybe it was a shadow that nobody else saw that fell across the floor—or maybe he felt the cold breath of death at his back. For just an instant the trigger finger stopped its squeezing. His eyes darted for just a small part of a second toward the door.

Then Joe saw what it was, in that split second that Bonner had to make up his mind. From somewhere, there wasn't time to figure out where, a figure appeared in the doorway. Joe glimpsed those pale, white eyes of Jody Passo.

Bonner's face paled. Instinctively, his little gun swerved in Passo's direction, but then it started back. Time is a funny thing sometimes. It was just a small piece of a second, but it was long enough for the geologist to add everything up and get his answer. Things had changed now. Those pale eyes of Passo's said he was there to do something about Barrett's killing. That made three men that Bonner was going to have to get out of the way—Passo, Joe, and Syd Garner. And his little derringer only held two bullets.

He was through. The answer would have been the same if he had thought about it all night. But if he was through, those wild eyes said he

was taking somebody with him—Joe Savoy.

IT WAS one of those times when no matter what you do you can't make things any worse. Somewhere back in the muddy part of Joe's mind, he was aware that the little derringer had swerved slightly toward the doorway. Not much. Just a little flick of the wrist, then Bonner had his mind made up.

It took a little time for him to jerk his gun back—about as long as it takes a lizard to blink, or a fly to jump. There was no way of knowing if there was time to do any good. At a time like that you don't think. Your gun-hand takes a mind of its own and goes to work, and then you pray.

A gun's roar jarred the room, and then there was the sudden sickening awareness that Bonner couldn't miss.

But he *did*. He must have. There had been a roar of a gun, but there hadn't been the numbing smash of a bullet that Joe had expected. Then, dumbly, he watched Bonner jerk and spin crazily across the room. He doubled and his face drained white, as if he had been slammed in the belly with a sledge.

Slowly Joe became aware of his .45 in his own hand, and the little whispers of smoke writhing up from the muzzle like restless fingers. He didn't know how the gun had got there. You hardly ever do at a time like that.

"That was nice shooting, Savoy. But it's over now—you can drop your gun."

Passo had moved on cat-feet inside the room. Joe felt the gunman behind him with a .45 trained on the small of his back. Joe dropped the gun and turned, carefully.

The little gunman smiled faintly. He fixed those white eyes on Syd Garner, and finally on Joe.

"I figured you was the one I'd have to get even with for killing Barrett." Jody Passo turned his head slightly and spat out the front door. He looked down at the dead Bonner. "I never figured on the punk here. But he wasn't so smart at that. If he hadn't shot his mouth off so much, he could have fooled everybody."

Joe stared into the muzzle of that .45 and said nothing. Then Bat and Phoenix framed themselves in the doorway.

"Gather up the guns and empty them," Passo said.

The two gunmen came inside, picked up the guns, and punched out the cartridges. They tossed the cartridges out the door and dropped the guns in the corner of the room. Jody Passo nodded and looked at Syd Garner.

"I never thought I'd figure in saving a marshal's life—but it looks like that's the way it worked out, and you, Savoy, with your luck you ought to gamble for a living."

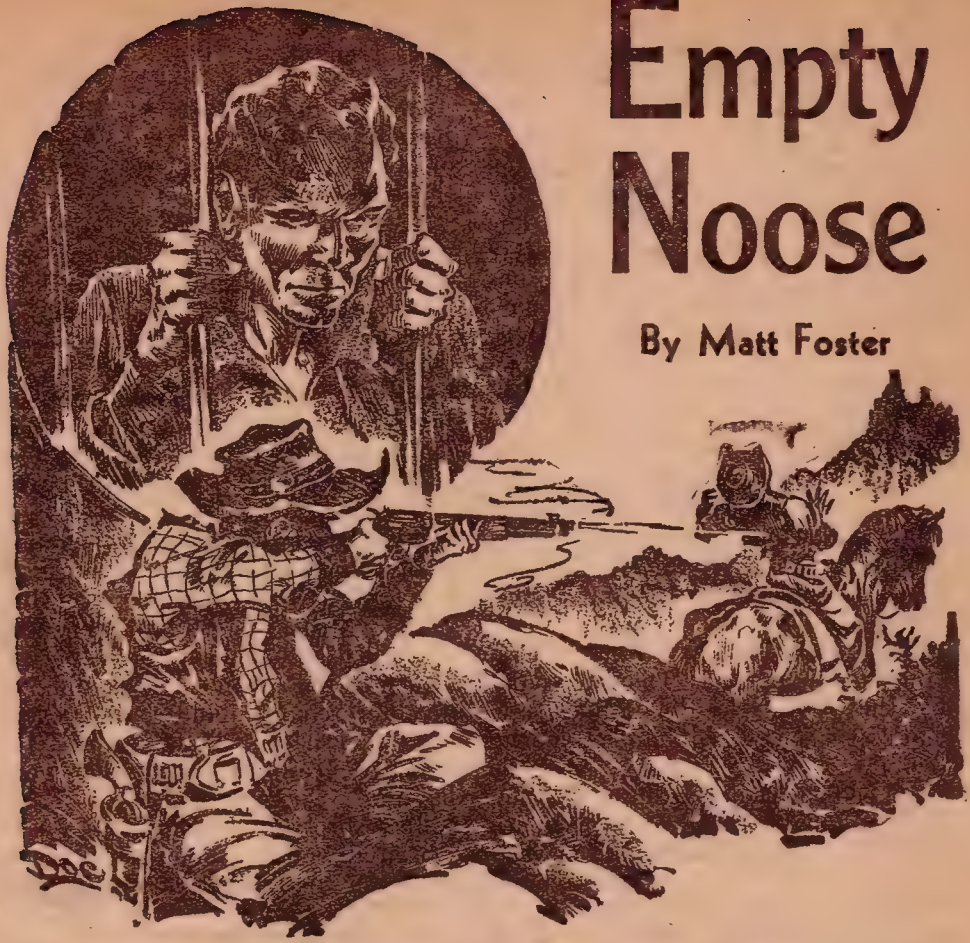
"I do."

A grin flicked at the little gunman's mouth. "Maybe I'll be seeing you. But not in Oil Valley." He flipped his gun once and pushed it into his holster. He turned, walked out of the door and into the night. In a few seconds there was the sound of horses as the three gunmen rode to the south.

The room was quiet again. There was a quiet little sobbing from Ann Metcliff as the shock began to wear off. Syd Garner moved over clumsily, gently, and pressed her face to his big shoulder. They didn't know Joe was in the room. They didn't care.

Outside, a pale moon had come up in the east, sifting white light and black shadows over the land. A few stars gleamed dully like bits of cracked ice stuck to a hard sky. In the distance a coyote howled, and the glare of the gas torches of Oil Valley beat bloodily against a low cloud

Joe Savoy walked to where his horse stood beside the hitching rack and got on. For a minute he listened to the meaningless little sounds inside the ranch house, then he nudged his horse gently and rode to the south.



Empty Noose

By Matt Foster

Somehow the old marshal couldn't believe his amigo's son had done that bushwhack job. But when he tried to prove the younker innocent, the lawman had his own neck measured for a hangrope halter.

THE longhorn mustache that drooped down each corner of his mouth was a shade whiter than his hair. He was lean, square-shouldered, and there were two guns strapped to his thighs. The star pinned to his vest was as shiny as if it had been made yesterday instead of a dozen years ago.

Marshal Frank McLeod sat behind his desk at the jail and wondered why in tarnation he'd ever chosen to become a lawman. His usually smooth forehead was deeply wrinkled and there was a brooding look in his eyes.

Marshal Frank McLeod had a hanging in the morning.

He slowly pulled the sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, rolled himself a cigarette, and lit a match. He growled impatiently, flung the cigarette to the floor, and began walking up and down. It was dark outside now. In a matter of twelve hours

everybody in town would gather at the newly erected gallows to see Joe Carey marched out, led beneath the rope, and killed.

McLeod came to an abrupt stop. The ends of his mustache actually bristled. He picked up the big key ring from his desk and resolutely walked to the barred door. He unlocked it and went inside to the narrow passage off which led three cells.

Only one was occupied. The boy inside it jumped to his feet, leaped to the door, and gripped the bars until his knuckles gleamed. He was a handsome boy except for the slightly weak chin. His hands were smooth. No lariat, no branding iron had passed throught them very often. He had wavy, sorrel-colored hair and pale blue eyes.

Joe Carey said, "Frank—something has happened. They've found out the truth. I—I'm goin' free. That's it. You're goin' to let me go free."

McLeod twirled the big key ring, fighting a battle with his conscience and the badge glittering on his vest. He studied the frantic-eyed young man for a long minute before he said:

"Ain't nothin' happened, Joey. They're lettin' you hang."

JOE CAREY'S fingers slowly relaxed, his arms fell. He walked the two or three steps to his wooden pallet and sat down on the edge of it. He lowered his head into his hands.

McLeod said, "Look up, Joey. Look at me and keep on lookin'. There—that's it. Now tell me—did you drygulch Deuce Bailey?"

"No," Joey cried. "No, Frank. I swear I didn't kill him. Somebody has got to believe me. Frank, you just gotta believe I'm tellin' the truth."

"Mebbe I do, son. Been a peace officer longer'n I like to recall and I never did see no guilty man look me square in the eye. Now I'm thinkin' that if you didn't shoot Deuce, who did?"

"I don't know," Joey cried. "I've tried and tried to think. There ain't time. I'm to hang in the mornin'. Frank, I don't want to die that way. I ain't afraid of dyin', but at the end of a rope with everybody standin' there watchin' . . ."

"Son, the way to get you outa this mess is by findin' the hombre who did use that rifle. Now I'm relatin' how it happened. The way it was told in court. You just stand there and listen."

Joey nodded. McLeod frowned, fashioned himself another cigarette, and then passed the makings to Joey.

McLeod said, "You always been a hell-roarer, Joey. For a boy like you, you drink too much and you gamble with no right to gamble because you don't earn your own money. Howsomever, this here night you were well oiled and decided you could bust Deuce's bank. Danged near did, too, until luck changed and you lost everythin' you had includin' some IOU's which Deuce knew your father would pay up."

Joey broke in, "Marshal—Frank, I been all you say, but I never been a liar. You gotta believe me. I didn't kill Deuce. I was drunk and mad and I figgered he was cheatin'. There was a card with the corner nail-marked. Now I know Deuce didn't do it because he never cheated, but I was too drunk. I called him on it."

McLeod nodded. "And got yourself chucked out on your ear. Oh, Deuce didn't do it, but Steve Tennant did. Seein' how Steve owns the Golden Horseshoe, I reckon he had the right. Then what happened?"

"I'm—not sure. I—I remember gettin' up and swearin' I'd kill Deuce and everybody else connected with the Golden Horseshoe. I walked away. Next thing I knew I was ridin' my pinto mare and you came ridin' after me."

McLeod sighed deeply. "You don't change your story none, anyways. Yep—I got word that Deuce had stepped out of the Golden Horseshoe and while he was standin' on the porch, some

jasper shot him through the head with a rifle. Everybody said you'd threatened to kill him so I went lookin'. I found you ridin' toward home. The rifle in your saddle boot had just been fired. It was the same caliber as the bullet that passed clean through Deuce's head."

"I didn't do it," Joey pleaded. "Please—nobody believes me except Pop and Roy Dorer. That ain't enough."

McLEOD was staring down the dismal corridor. "Now mebbe Steve Tennant had a reason for killin' Deuce. If he wanted him dead, no better time would ever come than after you cussed Deuce out and threatened him. But why would Steve want Deuce dead when Deuce made so much money for him?"

"I don't know. All I'm sure of is—"

"Yeh—yeh, you didn't kill Deuce. Can you think of anybody else who might want Deuce dead?"

"No. I've tried and tried. Everyone liked Deuce. I was a fool to call him a cheat."

"A drunken fool," McLeod amended. He selected one big key, thrust it into the cell door, and turned the lock. He swung the door wide while Joey watched him with big eyes.

The marshal said, "Git, Joey. Start outa here and keep on goin'. If I see you before I got the right killer hung, I'll have to shoot you on sight. That'll be m'duty. Right now I ain't thinkin' much about duty. I'm thinking of your ma. Might have married her myself once, only your pa beat me to it. We were friends, until your ma died. Then I guess we stopped seein' one another so much. But your pa is my friend and I ain't hangin' his kid."

"Frank, you'll get into trouble. You're bound to. I'd rather stay here and take my chances—"

"You ain't got a single chance," McLeod grumbled. "I said git. This is a jailbreak, but if you don't hurry up, it'll be a jaw bustin' and I mean your jaw."

Joey hesitated only another moment. The fact that he would be hung in a matter of hours was the clinching argument. He fled from the jail and McLeod nodded in approval when he heard the boy riding away.

He didn't sleep that night. At dawn he stepped out onto the porch, stretched and yawned prodigiously. Just down the street, the crowd was already gathering. A scaffold had been erected and it drew people from all over town and from the outlying ranches.

One of those at the front of the throng was chunky, fat-faced Steve Tennant who had owned the gambling house and the dead gambler. Tennant was here to enjoy himself.

McLeod saw Mike Carey, Joey's father, dismount slowly and tie up his horse. With Mike was Roy Dorer, the man who had bought up the spawling Flying T spread. Mike Carey looked twenty years older than he really was.

Dorer was somber-faced. A man of about forty, hard-looking and efficient. He wore batwings as if they were none too familiar to him, but his J.B. was rolled in approved fashion and there was no question that he was an experienced and hard-headed rancher. When he'd talked Mike Carey into leasing his water rights, Dorer showed exactly how keen a business man he could be. Lack of water was what enabled Dorer to buy the ranch so cheap.

McLeod's eyes scanned the rest of the crowd. Once they narrowed a little. He was looking for Ed Briggs who used to be a gambler until Deuce Bailey had showed him up as a cheat. Ed Briggs had a mighty good reason for killing Deuce. It would be like Briggs to return and witness an innocent man hang for the crime he'd committed. Briggs's humor ran in such channels.

THE marshal took a hitch in his gunbelts, pulled down the brim of his hat, and strolled slowly toward

the scaffold. When they saw him without his prisoner, without even a single deputy, they sensed something had happened. McLeod climbed onto the scaffold and raised both hands for silence.

"Seems like you came for nothin'," he said. "Young Joey Carey looped outa his cell last night and he ain't been caught up with since. I ain't sorry either. To my way of thinkin', the herd of you are people who take a heap of pleasure in seein' a man die. You won't be seein' one today. That's all."

Ed Briggs pressed closer. "You let him go. You been a pard to his pa for years. You even wanted to marry his mother once. You let him go on account of you are weak livered and chickenhearted. Me, I say we oughta string you up in his place."

McLeod rubbed his chin and smiled. "I'm standin' on the scaffold. The rope's right behind me. Anybody who cares to come up here and put it around my neck is welcome to try, only he better come shootin'."

Ed Briggs yelled more of his contempt. The crowd was hesitating. If they were bloodthirsty enough, they might attack, and McLeod knew he'd never open fire on the lot of them. He saw Mike Carey and Roy Dorer quietly untie their horses. Mike took both of them in charge and Dorer hurried to the hitchbar in front of the jail where McLeod's white stallion was tied. In a few moments Dorer was riding the stallion back. He dismounted beside Mike Carey who was behind the scaffold now.

Suddenly the crowd, under Ed Briggs's lashing tongue, shouted for blood and surged forward.

Mike Carey called out, "Frank—jump. Frank—this way."

McLeod realized he'd have little chance. He turned, ran across the few feet of scaffold, and saw that Dorer had led the white stallion directly below.

The marshal jumped into the saddle. There was shouting, quite a lot of it, but none of it good. Dorer and Mike Carey were beside him and the trio rode hard. McLeod led them into the hills, heading toward Dorer's big spread. There were no sounds of pursuit so they rested behind a row of aspen trees, their horses blowing mightily.

McLeod said, "I'm thankin' you. I was a fool to stand there and tell 'em Joey had escaped. Fact is, he didn't escape at all. I let him go."

Mike Carey moved his horse over beside McLeod's and stretched out a hand. "Frank, there is nothin' in the world I could do now which will repay what I owe you for savin' Joey. I know he was innocent."

Dorer moved closer too. "I've told Mike all along that something would happen. I had that feeling. But marshal—they'll hunt Joey down. They won't stop until they've shed his blood."

McLeod shook his head. "Reckon that's about it, Mr. Dorer, but the first blood to be shed won't be Joey's. He's a lot like his ma used to be. Wants to handle his own business in his own way."

"What do you mean, Frank?" Mike Carey asked.

"Joey never said much at the trial, but last night when he knew his time was drawin' near, he told me the truth. Joey told everybody he was too drunk to remember anythin' that night. He lied. Sure he was drunk, worse than a renegade Indian with a gallon of rye, but he could still see. He knows who took his rifle, shot Deuce and put the rifle back in the saddle boot."

Dorer gasped. "But why didn't he say so at the trial?"

McLeod shrugged. "Who'd believe him? I tried to make him say who this jigger was, but he wouldn't talk. Claimed if he couldn't take care of the gent personal, then nobody else would. So I let him out, gave him a six-gun and a pocketful of slugs."

MIKE CAREY whistled loudly. "Then Joey is after the man who really killed Deuce. The young fool. If he kills him, he'll never prove his innocence, just add another murder to his list."

McLeod said, "Joey ain't much interested in anythin' but lettin' this murderer have a big taste of lead. Reckon Joey ain't losin' much time either. Mike, you better go home in case he comes to see you first. Try and talk him out of it."

"Sure, Frank," Carey said. "But what about you? That mob will be as anxious to get you as Joey."

McLeod shook his head. "They'll hang you too. I'm lookin' for a safer place."

"What about my ranch?" Dorer exclaimed. "I don't think I was recognized in town. I'm new here. I never even met you before, marshal. I can hold them back."

"Reckon that's a right smart idea," McLeod admitted. "We'd better be ridin'."

They watched Mike Carey disappear over the rimrock. Then they rode slowly toward the Flying T. Dorer was quiet for the first mile. Then he said:

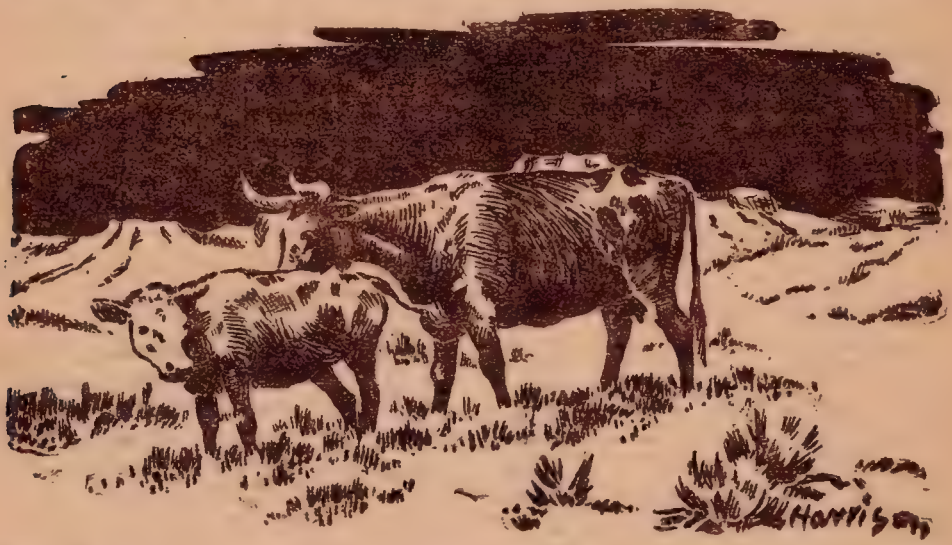
"Marshal, if Joey didn't kill Deuce, who do you suppose did?"

"Could be Steve Tennant," McLeod replied. "Why, I dunno. But Steve's got killer blood in him. Then there's Ed Briggs who got showed up as a cheat by Deuce. If Briggs saw a chance to drygulch Deuce and Joey would be blamed, he'd do it quick."

Dorer shook his head. "Joey is a young fool and I feel sorrier for Mike. Joey is all he's got—all he lives for. Marshal, I'm siding you no matter what happens, even if it comes to gunplay."

"Thank you," McLeod said. "I'm mighty beholden to you."

When they reached the ranch, McLeod didn't dismount. "Everybody knows this stallion," he explained. "I better tie him up back of the house."



McLeod rode to the back, very close to the house so that he could peer into the windows. Finally he tide up the stallion and walked around front to where Dorer was waiting.

For the rest of the day they talked about Joey and Mike and the mysterious murderer. After dark, McLeod untied the stallion and ground-hitched him ten feet from a bedroom window. That window was raised halfway. McLeod tied one end of his lariat to the saddle horn, dismounted, and walked to the window. He threw the rest of the rope onto the bedroom floor.

Dorer was sitting in the parlor when McLeod returned. The marshal

sat down and sighed. "Reckon Joey is stalkin' his kill 'bout now," he said. "He told me he'd wait till dark. Yes sir, the hombre he's after ain't got long to live."

"It must be that Ed Briggs," Dorer said nervously. "I've been trying to think—"

McLeod leaned back, pursed his lips and began to whistle. The first note was loud and off key.

Dorer suddenly sat erect. "Marshal—what was that? In the bedroom?"

McLeod shrugged. "Didn't hear anythin', Mr. Dorer. Some wind outside. Makes freak noises . . ."

SUDDENLY Dorer was on his feet, hand on the butt of his six-gun. "Somebody's in the bedroom," he whispered hoarsely. "I can hear him moving across the floor. I tell you I heard it."

"You act like a man with a guilty conscience." McLeod shrugged. "Why don't you go look-see and find out? What makes you so nervous anyhow?"

Dorer had drawn his gun and was moving toward the bedroom door. Seeing that it was ajar, he raised his foot and kicked it open. McLeod whistled again. Just one shrill note.

Inside the room something moved. There was no question about it. Dorer fired, then fired again and again. Aiming at the corners, yelling his hate for Joey Carey. Defying him to come out.

No sound came from the bedroom after the four shots died away. McLeod was standing in the center of the parlor. His voice was loud enough to penetrate Dorer's confused brain.

"Joey ain't there," he said. "He's hidin' at his pa's place. What you heard was my rope. The other end is tied to my saddle and the stallion moved every time I whistled. The rope dragged across your floor and you figgered it was Joey stalkin' you."

Dorer, gun still in his fist, turned slowly. His polished exterior was gone now and in its place were the eyes and sneer of a killer.

McLeod spoke calmly. "Way I figgered it, Steve Tennant didn't kill Deuce 'cause he lost money when Deuce was killed, and Steve ain't a man to let gold slip through his fingers. It couldn't have been Ed Briggs on account of I checked and he was thirty miles away that night."

Dorer said nothing. He was half crouched, white teeth showing brightly in the yellow lamplight.

McLeod went on, as if this were only a casual conversation. "I started wonderin' if I was on the wrong trail. Maybe the killer didn't care who he killed so long as Joey Carey was hung for the job. So I hunted for somebody who hated Joey or would make money if he died. It came to you, Dorer. If Joey was hung, his pa would sell his ranch and you were there to buy it. His pa was only keeping the spread goin' on account of Joey. You needed the water rights. Leasin' them wasn't enough. You figgered you could get them outright and for cheap money."

Dorer's sneer became a grin. "Nobody else is smart enough to figure that, marshal. And you ain't telling nobody—"

McLeod's draw was a blur of movement. Dorer only had to pull trigger, but while McLeod drew, he also jumped sideways. Dorer's bullet missed him by a foot. McLeod's .45 didn't miss. Dorer crumpled and pitched to the floor.

The marshal sent one of the hands to town for help. He listened to Dorer groaning. McLeod said, "Figgered a killer, no matter how bad he is, scares easy. You were scared Joey had seen you. Scared he was comin' to kill you. Get a man as nervous as that and you can fool him with a simple trick. Like having a horse draw a rope across the floor of the next room."

Dorer turned his head. "Marshal, I'm dying. Do something for me. You can't let me die."

McLeod lit a cigarette. "Don't you worry none. You'll live, but don't go dependin' on me to do anythin' for you. All I can do is hang you."

Dorer groaned louder.

Dressed for Boot Hill

By Ray Gaulden

The little cowtown tailor swapped his scissors for a six-gun when he measured that killer for a wooden overcoat.

OLD IRA LOGAN had his tape measure stretched across Doc Jarret's thin shoulders, taking the medico's measurements for a new suit, when the door of the tailor shop burst open and a man poked his head inside.

"Get over to your office, quick, Doc!

They just brought Frank Morton in—shot all to hell!"

Ira Logan had his back to the door and he stood there, his head twisted around, staring at the man, alarm widening his sun-puckered gray eyes. He dropped the tape measure and his fingers were trembling as he removed his glasses. He found it hard to believe that something had happened to the easygoing, likable young Frank Morton.

Doc Jarret grabbed his coat and Ira followed him out the door, running across the strip of dark red dust that was Aspen City's main street. A crowd had already begun to gather in front of the doctor's little office, and old Ira Logan frantically fought his way through them. He got through the door and stopped, stood there weak-kneed, staring at the young man stretched out on a table in the center of the pin-neat little office.

Frank Morton was not moving and the color had drained from his face. The little tailor stared fearfully at the dark stain on the front of the clean blue shirt.

Doc Jarret bent over the table and Ira's breath made a thin, sharp sound in the silence of the room. Then the medico straightened slowly, his lips tight. "There's nothing I can do—he's gone."

There was a washed-out feeling inside Ira and he took a stumbling step back. He bumped into a chair and put his hand on the back of it to steady himself. Dimly, he heard someone say, "Here comes the sheriff."

BOOTS thudded across the floor and Press Vernon came into Ira's line of vision. A blocky, straight-backed man in his fifties, Vernon had worn the sheriff's badge here in Aspen City for fifteen years. He went swiftly to the table now, his shaggy eyebrows pulling together as he stared at that still form.

Vernon turned, putting his eyes on Doc Jarret. "What happened?"

A puncher who worked for one of the big outfits came across the room, rolling the brim of his flat-topped hat. He said, "I was on my way to town, Press. I heard a shot and a few minutes later, I come across Frank alongside the trail. I didn't see no sign of the gent that got him. I figured I'd better get Frank to town as fast as I could."

The sheriff nodded. "I'll get a posse together and we'll ride back to where you found him and have a look around."

The lawman went to the doorway and began picking men out of the crowd.

Ira felt the need of fresh air so he walked wearily from the office, working his way through the knot of curious townsfolk. Their faces swam before his eyes and when someone spoke to him, he did not answer. He leaned against the front of the building next door, staring vacantly into the thick red dust of the street.

The crowd began to break up. Press Vernon and six of the townsmen walked briskly toward the sheriff's office. A few minutes later they were mounted and racing out of town. Ira watched the dust rise and settle slowly.

Presently, a wagon rattled down the street and Ira's lips thinned as he saw Dave Arden, the undertaker, pull up in front of the doc's place. Ira moved toward his shop, walking with heavy tread, oblivious to the people he passed on the way. The thought kept pounding in the little tailor's head: *Frank's dead—murdered!*

Frank had been more than just a friend; he had been more like a son to Ira Logan. Ira's lips twisted bitterly. It didn't seem right, somehow, for a man who had been so straight to be cut off in his prime that way.

Frank Morton and Jay Corley owned a little outfit on Cow Creek, but they came into town often and spent many lonely evenings around the stove in the living quarters back of Ira's shop. The little tailor had gotten where he looked forward to

those visits and he always told himself if he had married when he was younger, and had sons of his own, he would have wanted them to be like Frank and Jay.

Frank was dead now and Ira felt the loss deeply. He went into his shop and slumped down in the chair at his littered workbench. He had been a tailor in this town for fifteen years—a good one, too. He had more work than he could take care of, but now he couldn't get his mind on it. Something had gone out of him and he knew it would never return.

He sat for a while, turning his shears over in his hands, staring at them moodily. Finally, he arose and went out onto the street. He walked down to Dave Arden's undertaker parlor and turned in.

"Dave," he said, "I don't care what it costs—I want Frank to have the best."

The white-bearded undertaker nodded solemnly. "Frank was a good boy. He'll get the best."

IRA dropped into a chair beside Arden's old roll-top desk and stared bitterly at the freshly scrubbed floor. "Who do you suppose killed him, Dave?"

Arden shook his head, his lips puckered. "Frank always got along with everybody. I always figured he never had an enemy in the world. He could take a drink or leave it alone. He must have known the gent that killed him because the gun was fired at close range, and I'm pretty sure Frank fought with the killer."

Ira looked up quickly. "What makes you think so, Dave?"

The undertaker opened a drawer of his desk and took out a ragged little piece of cloth. "Found it clutched in Frank's hand, Ira. I was figuring on turning it over to Press as soon as he gets back."

Ira took the piece of dark wool and turned it over in his hands, staring at it intently. Finally, he said, "Dave, let me keep this, will you?"

Arden shifted his weight in the chair and appeared undecided. "I don't know, Ira. I really ought to turn it over to Press."

Ira's face was stony. "Dave, I'm going to get the skunk that killed my friend. This scrap of cloth might help me find him, but it wouldn't mean a thing to the sheriff."

The undertaker ran his fingers through his white beard. "I know you thought a heap of that boy, Ira, so go ahead and take it."

"Thanks, Dave," Ira said, and went out onto the street. He stood for a moment staring at the sign on the front of the Wagonwheel Café. It was suppertime, but he had no appetite this day. He started back to his shop and paused when he saw Doc Jarret cutting across the street toward him. The medico's face was grave and Ira stared at the man quizzically.

Doc stopped, breathing a little heavily, his face shiny with perspiration. "Some more bad news for you, Ira. I just heard that the sheriff is combing the hills, looking for Jay Corley."

Ira frowned, a vague fear beginning to form inside him. He asked, "What does Press want with Jay?"

"It seems he thinks Jay is the one that killed Frank—uncovered some evidence, or found a witness—or something."

There was a sick look in old Ira's eyes, but he shook his head stubbornly. "There's something wrong somewhere, Doc. Jay didn't kill Frank."

Doc Jarret said dubiously, "I wouldn't be too sure, Ira. Jay and Frank were partners and they were both stuck on Jane Noland. You never can tell when there's a woman in the picture. Maybe—"

Ira's eyes were flashing as he said harshly, "Maybe nothing, Doc!"

And with that, he turned and strode angrily down the plank walk. He went into his living quarters at the rear of the shop and dropped into his favorite rocker. He looked at the other two chairs and he thought of

the evenings he and Jay and Frank had sat in this room and played cards, laughing and talking and enjoying themselves.

Now Jay was being hunted as Frank's murderer, and knowing Sheriff Vernon to be a hardheaded man, Ira realized that young Corley might never have a chance to prove his innocence.

Ira arose suddenly and went out the back door, into the gathering darkness. He walked swiftly down to the livery stable. Five minutes later he was astride a mouse-colored gelding and riding out of town. He kept his eyes peeled for the posse as he rode across the flat, open country, but since he saw no sign of them he guessed they must be searching the hills. Ira listened constantly for the sound of gunfire, afraid that any minute it might come, and Jay Corley would be brought into Aspen City draped across a saddle.

AN HOUR later Ira reached the C Bar M, there on Cow Creek. The little ranch house that Jay and Frank had built was in darkness, and Ira pulled up in some brush at the edge of the front yard and dismounted. If the posse didn't get him first, Ira had a pretty good idea that young Corley would sneak down from the hills now that it was dark. Ira figured that Jay would be getting pretty hungry by this time.

The moon came up, washing the yard with its soft yellow light. It grew late and old Ira hunkered there in the brush, waiting, listening. He remembered how the two boys had worked hard to build this place into something. He remembered how they had both courted pretty, dark-eyed Jane Noland, the daughter of a neighboring rancher. Was it possible that they had quarreled over the girl? Could Jay have wanted her and the ranch so badly that he . . .

Ira swore softly and drove such thoughts from his mind. The two boys had been close. Jay couldn't have done a thing like that.

The air turned cold and the little tailor wished that he had worn a heavier coat. He wasn't used to being out like this, and his blood wasn't as thick as it had once been. He stretched his legs and wondered if he was wasting his time. Maybe the young cuss wouldn't come after all. But knowing Jay as he did, Ira didn't think he would run for long.

Ira had about decided to go into the house when a sound across the creek drew his attention. His heart pounded as he peered out of his hiding place in time to see a dark shape come up from the creek bank and duck behind a tree. Ira hunkered there, motionless, until the man, apparently satisfied that the place wasn't being watched, moved from behind the tree and went quickly toward the ranch house.

In the open now, moonlight struck the man's face, and Ira called softly, "Jay! Jay, it's me, Ira."

Before he recognized the voice, Jay Corley spun around, his hand whipping down. But Ira saw that he wasn't wearing a gun. Then the youth relaxed and Ira heard his pent-up breath whistle between his teeth. Ira stepped out of the brush and Jay came forward quickly. His clean-cut face looked pinched and haggard.

"Ira, what are you doing here?"

The little tailor gave him a level stare. "I had to talk to you, son. I wanted to hear your side of the story."

Corley's lips twisted bitterly. "The sheriff and his posse are beating the brush for me, Ira. They think I killed Frank."

Ira's eyes didn't leave his face. "You didn't, did you, son?"

"You know damned well I didn't do it, Ira. Somebody's crazy!"

Ira nodded grimly. "I just wanted to hear you say it, son. That's good enough for me."

Jay Corley cast an apprehensive glance out into the darkness, then he

sighed heavily and his shoulders sagged. He said, "I didn't even know Frank was dead. The last time I saw him, he was heading for town to buy some supplies."

Ira's eyes were thoughtful. "Did you have any words before he left?"

Corley rolled a cigarette with unsteady fingers. "Well, sort of. You see, somebody set fire to our haystack last night, and it's not the first time something like that has happened. Ever since we turned down Sid Spane's offer to buy us out, there's been trouble."

Ira frowned. "You boys never said anything to me about it."

Corley shook his head. "No. We didn't want you worrying your head about us, and besides, nothing very serious ever happened till this time. Of course, we suspected Spane, and this morning Frank was boiling mad. He wanted to go over to Spane's Arrowhead and have it out with the man."

"And you tried to stop him?"

Corley nodded soberly. "Yes, I tried to argue him out of it, because I knew we didn't have any proof. But Frank was dead set on going. He went into the house after his gun and when he come out, I grabbed him. We fought here in the yard and Frank got some of the mad out of his system. He finally agreed to let it ride till we knew something for sure."

Old Ira's mind was working. "The only thing I can figure, son, is that somebody was riding past. They saw you scrapping and figured it was over Jane."

"I reckon that's about the size of it, Ira. After Frank headed for town, I went to work mending fence. I was still at it when old Pablo, the goatherder, stopped by to tell me that the sheriff was looking for me, that Frank was dead."

Ira tilted his head suddenly, listening to the swift mutter of hoofbeats off there in the darkness. Jay Corley went rigid, his breath starting to come fast. Then he whirled and started for the house. But old Ira's voice stopped him.

"What do you figure on doing, son?"

Corley's jaw was ridged stubbornly and his mouth was a thin, tight line. "I went chasing off without a gun this afternoon. I'm getting one now."

The little tailor looked worried. He said, "That won't get you anything—except maybe a quick grave. Frank was thought a heap of on this range and that posse's got blood in their eyes. You run off and hide somewhere and they're apt to shoot you on sight."

But Jay Corley was moving toward the house again and this time he didn't stop. He flung over his shoulder, "I'm not letting them take me, Ira!"

Ira Logan listened to the sound of those fast-running horses off there in the night. That sound was growing louder now, and unless he missed his guess, Press Vernon and his posse would come pounding up any minute. In spite of the chill wind, there was sweat on Ira's face as he moved across the yard, dreading the thing he told himself he had to do.

WITH a sick feeling in his belly, Ira stood beside the open door of the house, a rock in his hand, listening to Corley prowl through the dark rooms inside. Then the young man came out and old Ira moved swiftly, swinging the rock he had gripped in his hand.

Corley groaned and staggered back, sat down heavily in the open doorway. Ira stooped and snatched the gun Jay had stuck in the front of his levis. He stepped back, relieved when he saw that the youngster didn't appear to be hurt much.

Corley acted a little bewildered. For a moment, he sat there and stared stupidly at the little tailor, his mouth slack. Then he shook his head and the moonlight was on his face, showing the scorn, the disillusionment.

He said bitterly, "I thought you

was the best friend I ever had, Ira. I reckon I was wrong."

Ira held the gun steady while the thud of hoofs drew nearer, but there was pain in his eyes and a cruel hand was twisting his insides.

"I'm sorry, son," he said miserably, "but I figure you'll be better off in jail than running around with half the men in the country looking for you."

Corley's face didn't soften. He said dryly, "Yeah. Mebbe I'll be safer hanging from the end of a rope!"

Ira winced and found it hard to meet the young man's eyes. He said reassuringly, "You'll get a trial, Jay, and a lot can happen between now and then."

Sheriff Vernon and his hard-riding posse arrived. Handcuffs were snapped on Corley's wrists and he was hoisted aboard a horse. Something tightened inside Ira as the youngster's accusing eyes met his.

On the way to town, Ira fell in beside the sheriff. He asked, "Who's your witness, Press?"

The lawman looked tired and his eyes were heavy. He shifted his weight in the saddle. "Why, it's Sid Spane, Ira. He happened to be ridin' by this mornin' and saw them fightin' in the yard. He heard Jay tell Frank that he was goin' to get him."

Ira glanced over his shoulder at Jay Corley, then back to the sheriff. "Sounds pretty thin to me, Press. You'll have to have more evidence than that to convict him on."

The lawman scowled. "Mebbe I'll find somethin' else. But after Jay's sweated it out in a cell for a while, he'll probably break down and confess."

Old Ira's eyes glowed strangely in the darkness as he mulled over the things Jay had told him about the trouble they'd had since their refusal of Sid Spane's offer to buy them out. Spane's Arrowhead bordered the C Bar M on the west, and recently, Ira knew, the man had bought the place adjoining it on the east. The C Bar M was keeping Spane from spreading out.

THE next day was Saturday, and there were a lot of folks in town. Ira Logan stood in the doorway of his shop and watched Sid Spane ride in and stop before the saloon. He was tall, this Spane; a man who carried himself with an exaggerated erectness. His slablike face was always smooth-shaven and he was the best-dressed man on the range. A hard man to please, too, Ira remembered. The little tailor had made quite a few suits for him, but usually Spane went down to the county seat and did his buying there.

At noon Ira locked his shop and went toward the café. He ran into Jane Noland coming out of the post office. She was a clear-eyed, straight-limbed girl, and it seemed such a short time ago to Ira that she was running around in pigtails and barefooted. Seeing her now made the old tailor conscious of how the years were getting away from him.

Usually, the girl had a nice smile for Ira, but her face was serious now and he could see the troubled shadows in her dark eyes.

She said, "Ira, can't you do something? You know the sheriff. Can't you talk to him, make him see that Jay is being framed?"

Ira sighed. "Press Vernon is a good lawman, Jane, but he's as mule-headed as they come. Without some proof, I'm afraid it wouldn't do much good to try to get him to listen."

Jane's lips trembled and she slumped dispiritedly. "We were going to be married next month," she said dully. "Jay was counting on you being best man. We—"

Tears misted her eyes suddenly and she ducked her head and ran down the street.

Ira stared after her, a tight, throbbing hurt in his throat. Then a spark of anger flickered in his eyes and he clenched his hands tightly at his sides. Damn it, it wasn't right for a woman

who loved so deeply to have to suffer like that.

Going into the saloon, Ira shuffled tiredly toward the bar. The room was crowded, but he noticed there wasn't the usual friendly atmosphere found here on Saturdays. He sensed something dark and sinister in this gathering and he frowned as he found a vacant spot at the far end of the crowded bar.

When the big bartender, his fat face glistening, came along, Ira said, "A beer, Joe."

The fat man drew one and set it on the wet mahogany. He glanced along the bar, his forehead knitted with worry.

Ira asked, "What's going on, anyway?"

The bartender scowled. "I don't like it, Ira. Sid Spane is spendin' money like it was dirt. He's buyin' drinks for everybody and he's doin' a lot of talkin'—sayin' what a fine fella Frank was and what ought to be done with the skunk that shot him."

Ira touched the glass of beer, but he did not pick it up. He turned his head a little and had a glimpse of Spane, who was standing up close to the bar, about ten feet down. The rancher's slablike face was flushed, and suddenly he called out in a loud voice:

"Set 'em up again, Joe, and leave the water out of this next round. Come on, boys, the drinks are on me again."

The bartender shot Ira a troubled glance as he moved down the bar. The little tailor gripped the edge of the bar while the cold finger of fear probed his spine. He saw men whom he had known for a long time, good men, their faces colored with drink, bellying up to the bar, slapping Spane on the back.

His face a little pale, a cold spot inside him growing and spreading, Ira went out and back to his shop. He entered his living quarters and got out the little scrap of cloth Dave Arden had given him. He examined it closely, holding it up to the light and staring at it long and hard.

FINALLY, he went across the room and dug down in an old trunk. He came up with a holstered gun and belt. He removed the six-shooter and stood there balancing it in his hand while memories came crowding around him. The Texas border country and a wild kid with powder-smoke in his eyes. He had been fast with a gun and he had raised some hell. A bank was robbed and he was sent to prison. There he had time to do some thinking and to learn a trade. When he had served his time, he came to this town and went into business. He had been happy here, the past all but forgotten. But now there was a debt to be paid.

People who had known Ira Logan for fifteen years stared at him strangely as he stepped to the street. They had never seen him wearing a gun, and now he had one strapped about his waist.

He saw them standing like so many statues on the plank walks as he walked stiffly, deliberately toward the saloon. Behind him, a man said something in a hoarse voice, but Ira did not catch what it was. He did not look around, but kept moving. He saw Jane Noland come out onto the porch of the general store and he tried to smile at her. But his lips felt funny and the smile wouldn't come.

As Ira went into the saloon, noting that the crowd was louder now, he thought of Jay Corley down there in a jail cell and wondered if the youngster knew what was going on here. He wondered why everybody couldn't see through this play.

Nobody seemed to notice the old tailor as he stood there by the door, his eyes on Sid Spane. The rancher was facing the bar. He threw his head back as he tossed off his drink. Then suddenly, he leaped up on the bar and held up his hands to still the roar of the crowd.

The noise died down and Ira saw

men standing loose-mouthed and red-eyed, staring at Spane stupidly. The owner of the Arrowhead spoke in a loud voice.

"Boys! I say we've fooled around long enough. A skunk that would kill his own pardner don't deserve no trial. I've got a rope on my saddle outside. Are you with me?"

Ira saw some of the men shift uncomfortably, but for the most part, they roared their approval. His face like flint, Ira watched Spane jump to the floor and wave his arm.

"Let's go!"

They came toward the door, Spane in the lead, yelling, the clump of their boots shaking the room. Then suddenly, they drew up, for old Ira was blocking their exit. And there was something about the little tailor that made them stand back and take notice. Perhaps it was the set of his face, or the way he was crouched down a little, his hand close to the butt of the six-shooter.

SID SPANE threw a quick glance at his followers, then he looked back at Ira, and the rancher's eyes were narrow and mean.

"What the hell've you got on your mind?" he asked roughly.

A frosty little smile touched Ira's lips and his eyes bored into Spane's. He said, "Seems like you're in an awful big hurry to get Jay out of the way, Sid."

Spane stepped back, temper marking his face. "Who do you think you are, you old goat, talkin' to me like that? Why would I want to get Jay out of the way?"

That tight little smile stayed on Ira's lips. "Because it was you that shot Frank, Sid!"

A murmur went through the crowd and Spane took a step back, some of the color draining from his face. But he quickly got hold of himself and put a sneer on his lips. "Damned if that's not pretty good. You must have been eatin' loco weed, old man."

Ira shook his head slowly. "It's no use, Sid. Frank and Jay wouldn't sell out to you, so you killed Frank and tried to frame it on Jay."

Spane licked his lips, his eyes very bright. "Mebbe you've got proof?"

Ira nodded, a queer feeling inside him. "Yes, Sid. You and Frank evidently had a fight before you killed him. Frank had a little piece of cloth gripped in his hand. I recognized it because it came from a suit I made."

It was deathly still for a moment and Ira could hear the big clock back of the bar ticking. Then a man coughed and, as if it were a signal, Sid Spane clawed for his gun.

Behind him, Ira heard the sound of the sheriff's voice, but he didn't turn. He kept his eyes on Spane, watching the man's gun come up. Lead ripped a splinter from the door behind Ira, but that was all. His own piece spoke once and Spane staggered back. The rancher's weapon sagged. He tried hard to raise it, but he lacked the strength. The gun hit the floor and Spane fell down beside it.

Ira pouched his six-shooter and breathed a long sigh of relief, knowing now that the old speed had not left him. He looked at the townsmen and many of them could not face him.

Ira turned and looked at Press Vernon, detecting a new respect in the lawman's eyes.

"That was pretty good, Ira, you remembering that you made that suit for Sid."

They stepped out onto the porch.

"The truth is, Press, I didn't really know that piece of cloth came from one of Sid's suits. But I gambled that Sid would be so excited he wouldn't remember, offhand, whether I made that suit for him or not."

The sheriff said, "I'll be damned!"

Old Ira Logan smiled, listening to the talk that was running through the town, watching Jane Noland as she hurried toward the jail. The gun felt heavy about his waist and he wanted to get back to the shop and put it away. He figured he had better be getting to work on Jay's wedding suit.

Vultures Prey on Easy Pickin's

By
Joseph Commings

Instead of making a fast take in Easy Pickin's, the wily tinhorn found this cowtown had a few tricks up its own sleeve.

THE mail coach stopped at the stage stand on Main Street. The coach driver leaned sideways and said to the single passenger, "Easy Pickin's, mister. They used to pick up gold nuggets right off the street a couple years ago. But gold ain't so easy to git these days."

"My dear man," said the single passenger, "I'm going to get myself a sackful."

The coach driver looked doubtful. "You don't look like no miner." The passenger was as plump as a quail.

"I'm not. I've never swung a pick one lick in my whole life. I don't have to now. No man does when he can live by his natural talents, his wits. Drive me to the Raffle House."

"We're standin' right in front of it, mister."

"Ah, yes. Hop down and open the coach door for me. And look quick."

The driver came grumbling down from his high seat and opened the door. Out stepped a figure of self-admired magnificance. He was tall and portly. He had a round pink face with

hedges of the finest slate-gray mutton-chop whiskers west of the Mississippi. The face grimaced as he slapped the alkali dust off his elegant frock coat. In the buttonhole was a cholla flower with tissue-thin terra cotta petals. His trousers, above spatterdashes, had a lovely chessboard pattern.

He waved his swagger stick at his lone piece of luggage. "Boy! Carry my portmanteau inside!"

The coach driver looked open-mouthed. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Look lively."

Not bothering to see whether he was obeyed, the grandiloquent figure strode into the hotel lobby. His roving eye approved of the peacock-blue glacé plush upholstery and the Weber organ in the alcove. The driver had followed, lugging the bag. He dropped it near the desk and stood waiting expectantly to be remembered.

The plush-loving man smiled sweetly at him. "You'll find your reward in heaven, my good man."

The driver stomped out, muttering about the class of people that were cluttering up the West.

"Yes, sir?" said the clerk behind the desk, on his best manners. For all he knew, this man might be a railroad magnate.

The tall beaver hat came off with a flourish. "I must have a bed where my head faces the east—the way I'd be laid out in a grave. I'm not comfortable otherwise." He paid no attention to the way the clerk goggled. "Is the bridal suite empty?"

"Yes, it is," stuttered the clerk. "We'll have a rush for those rooms come June. This's the slack season."

"I'll take it."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk, regaining some of his poise. "And the weekly rates will be—"

"Rates!" He stared as if grossly insulted. "I," he said, drawing himself up to his full majestic height, "am Horatio Hackney! I never pay for anything!"

The clerk tried to find a dissenting voice, but it had cracked somewhere down in his larynx. He might as well try to argue with Svengali.

Hackney smiled disarmingly. Barefaced humbug, that's what it was. He felt that he had been born to outwit the common herd. "However," he said, "I'll make it a gamble. The gambling instinct is in even the lowest of us." He looked down his nose at the clerk. "I'll toss you for it."

"But I—"

Hackney had taken a Mexican silver coin out of his waistcoat pocket. "I call this my adobe dollar." He got it ready to flip. "You call."

"Ta— Heads!" cried the clerk frantically.

The coin flopped up and down. Hackney examined it on his big cushiony palm. "Tails! I get the suite for nothing."

THERE was a trick to it, of course. The coin never actually spun from his fingers. It went up with a deceptive wobble. He could make it obey him every time.

"Good," said Hackney. "That settles the matter of bills."

A graver look came on his florid face when his eyes fell on the poster tacked up behind the desk:

WANTED
Somber Sebastian
Notorious Road Agent
REWARD

"Have they caught him yet, that Somber Sebastian?" he asked the clerk.

"No, sir. I hear he's a desperate outlaw. He tried—"

"I'll be carrying a lot of money soon," said Hackney with some anxiety. "I want to be sure I'm safe."

"You'll be safe enough in Easy Pickin's. Somber Sebastian wouldn't try anything here. This town's got one of the best sheriffs we ever had."

"Who?"

"Zed Firestriker. Fearless, keen-eyed, best shot in—"

"You can spare me the electioneering. He's already got the job." Hackney bent distastefully and picked up his own portmanteau. "I'm expecting two friends. They'll ask for me when they come in. Send them right up to my rooms."

He went heavily up the stairs to the bridal suite . . .

Horatio Hackney had his frock coat off and was in his garibaldi blouse. He was practicing his coin toss when Lou Bidace and Darby Waymark sauntered in. Hackney quickly pocketed the adobe dollar and threw out his arms in greeting.

"My old friends! How good to see you again! It's been almost a year!"

Lou Bidace was a delicately formed feminine creature. She wore a big black Milan hat with veiling that tied under her round chin. Her bangs were as yellow as toasted Mexican beans. She had a small open bolero jacket over a peekaboo waist and a peg-topped skirt. The whole outfit was raspberry-colored. Some birds are made for bright feathers. She swung a drawstring miser's bag.

Hackney gave her a fatherly hug and she kissed him with an explosive smack on the cheek. "You're looking lovelier by the minute, Lou old girl!"

Then he gave Darby Waymark a resounding buff on the back. The hearty welcome caused Darby to stumble forward two steps and he almost coughed up his tonsils before he recovered his balance. Then he self-consciously straightened his moiré tie and twitched his narrow shoulders under his sack coat. Bear grease slicked down a mummy-brown cowlick. His olive eyes were on Hackney.

"How've you been, Hackney?" said Darby. "You don't look as if you've missed any of your feeding times."

Hackney bent over his traveling bag. "Wait'll I get out this bourbon, so's we can have a toast. I got it in Kentucky. That's where I've been. Race horses. Very lucrative. Ah, here we are. Three glasses. Do you mind drinking it out of a water tumbler, Darby?"

"No," he said. "I've drunk champagne out of a desert rat's hat."

"Lou never drinks hard liquor. I brought sasparilla especially for her."

"I've been on the wagon for twenty-four years," she said.

Hackney laughed as he filled three glasses. "How well I remember the first time I heard that. We were on the Barbary Coast. They kicked you out of that dance hall as an entertainer, Lou, because your singing voice left much to be desired. You formed your first partnership with me."

"I've heard all about it a dozen times," said Darby, impatiently eyeing the sloshing glasses in Hackney's fat fingers.

"You should have seen me, Darby," giggled Lou. "He told me to dress in rags."

Hackney chortled. "A ragamuffin. I had her wandering the streets securing money from guileless strangers for her poor, sick father. In a shawl, she makes a pathetic-looking little thing."

"Yeah," said Darby, bored. "The drinks, Hackney."

"Oh, yes." He passed them out, then lifted his to theirs. "Here's to the three of us and a fast take in Easy Pickin's." There was a moment of gulping while they swallowed. "Ah-h-h! What've you been doing, Darby?"

"The same as usual. Cards."

"Well, you never were much of a one for variety. Now observe my success. I—"

Lou interrupted, "You pretended to be a novelist once, writing a burglar story. And—"

"Yes," said Hackney, quickly taking it up, "and under that pretext I had a long talk with a banker. He was a simp for a crime story. He supplied me with the complete plan of his vault. What did I make that time?" he mused. "Close to twenty-

five thousand. I called that my royalty."

"You know your stuff, Hackney," said Darby. Then he burst into his first genuine laugh of the day. "What kills me is the way you say, *I am Horatio Hackney!* And the suckers hand you everything for—"

Hackney looked stern. "We'll have no joshing about that!"

Darby's laugh fled back down his throat. "Sorry, Hackney."

"We've got business. This town has been grazing long in green pastures. Bring your buckets. It's milking time."

DARBY WAYMARK went alone into the town's big gaming saloon, the El Dorado, pretending he wasn't associated with Hackney. Hackney stayed outside in the street with Lou, getting the attention of curious bystanders. They were curious because Lou was standing there with a loaded Sharps rifle in her hands.

"Gentlemen, I'm taking all bets," said Hackney as the crowd came in closer. He waved his swagger stick. "This is the lady known as Lou. She's the greatest sharpshooter I ever saw. She can make Annie Oakley look like a stumblebum with buck fever. She claims she can outshoot the best man in town. I bet she can. There's my money on the barrel head. Who's your crack shot?"

"Zed Firestriker, our sheriff," yelled a voice. "I'll go git 'im."

"You don't have to," said another voice. "I'm right here."

Firestriker came through the gap the crowd made for him. He was six and a half feet tall, lean and tough-looking as rawhide, with a lined young face and serious, faded blue eyes. Two guns were slung on his hips.

"He's cute," whispered Lou to Hackney.

"Keep your mind on your business," warned Hackney. He babbled on, "Ah-ah! A two-gun man. You think you're a match for the little lady?"

"I thought I'd better not let the challenge go by without speaking up," said Firestriker soberly. "But I don't think this's going to be fair."

"No, it isn't," agreed Hackney. "You're a sitting duck."

Lou was giving Firestriker a look that was as melting as a chinook wind. Hackney had to nudge her with his elbow to get ready.

"Get your bets down, gentlemen. Good—good. Now I want a man to produce a large coin. Have you got a gold piece, trader?"

"I'm a miner," said the man addressed. "I got one." He took a gold piece out of his poke. "What d'you want me to do with it?"

"I want you to toss it in the air as high as you can. About thirty feet. No, not yet. Wait'll I say ready. All set, Lou? Ladies first, gentlemen."

"Set," said Lou, bringing the rifle stock to rest against her shoulder. The gun barrel still pointed at the ground.

"Throw up the coin," ordered Hackney. "You notice I don't touch it. There's no trickery."

The gold coin went spinning up as high as the rooftops. A spinning coin at thirty feet is an impossible shot except for a superb marksman. Lou lifted the gun barrel skyward, hardly stopped to take aim, and pulled the trigger.

The coin vanished in a flick.

"First crack out of the box!" chortled Hackney. He patted Lou's shoulder. "You may rest on your laurels, my dear. It's your turn, sheriff. You have your choice of weapons."

Firestriker looked a little pale. He glanced uneasily at Lou. She gave him an encouraging smile. He pulled out the Savage on his right side. "I favor these."

"Excellent," said Hackney. He turned to the miner. "Another gold piece, please."

"Let me find the first one," grumbled the miner. "I ain't panned that

color to have you blast it away." He went on up the street hunting for it.

But another coin was forthcoming. Another bystander was willing to throw away his hard money.

"Up she goes for the sheriff!"

It went whirling aloft. Firestriker gritted his teeth grimly and emptied his six-gun at it. The coin plopped back into the dust, unscathed.

"Want to try it again with the other gun?" mocked Hackney, his hands reaching out for the bets.

Sweat was trickling down Firestriker's temples. He kept his eyes away from Lou. He could hear a few snickers in the background. "No," he said. "I had my chance. The light's getting bad."

HACKNEY raked the bets into his pocket. "My friend, why don't you admit it? You were beaten in open contest by a woman. The twilight that you see is the decline of an era of the West when men were men. Alas, that heroic day is drawing to a close. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*"

He took Lou by the arm and steered her into the El Dorado. "I can't see how you do it, my dear," he said in her ear. "But keep it up."

"That'll be easy," she said nonchalantly. "How much of a split do I get?"

"Don't fret about it, my child. We'll split the whole haul later."

Darby Waymark had firmly ensconced himself at a poker table. His stack of winnings kept growing, but poker is an all night job. When Hackney and Lou came up to linger at the table, Darby made believe he was meeting them for the first time.

"I heard you betting on some shooting outside, stranger," he said in a loud voice. "You can't pick up much on the street. Just peanuts. I'm glad you came in where the big money is."

Attentive ears were cocked to hear what Hackney would say. And Hackney said it. "What have you got to offer, sir? Not poker?"

"No. I'll wager everything I've got on the turn of a card."

"How do you mean?"

Darby called back the poker deal, shuffled the cards like a wizard, and slapped the whole deck down on the table. "Fifty-two cards. But only one ace of spades. If I bet that I'll cut the ace of spades, the chances are against me fifty-one to one."

"How mathematical," smiled Lou, looking completely innocent.

"Long odds," admitted Hackney, allowing his eye to glint with interest.

Darby reached out calmly and cut the deck. The card that was face-up in his palm was the ace of spades. "I was born lucky," he said with a smirk.

"Fortunate for you," said Hackney.

Darby produced a stamped leather wallet that bulged with currency and tossed it among his tall stacks of chips. "All together, that amounts to six thousand dollars. You cover it with the same amount, stranger, and it's all yours—if you cut the ace!"

Hackney's acting was flawless. He pinched the wattles under his chin, pondering, weighing, then he reluctantly shook his head. There was a sigh of disappointment from everybody in the big room when Hackney said, "I know when I'm outclassed."

Lou and a group of solid citizens clustered around Hackney as he pushed toward the bar.

Lou said, sounding desperate, "Horatio, that was our one big chance."

"Yes, I know, my dear," said Hackney humbly. "But it was too great a risk. Your gray-haired old mother will have to go to the poorhouse after all."

"Oh, don't say that, Horatio! There must be a way!"

"Sure, there's gotta be a way," said one disgruntled cowpoke. "I wanna see that fussed-up carpetbagger take a whittlin' down. He's been winnin' our dinero and razzin' us ever since he showed up." The gruff voices of the others agreed with him.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said Hackney. "I'm no match for him. Stand aside, please. You're in the way of my horn of whisky."

Lou grabbed his arms excitedly. "I know how you can beat him, Horatio!"

Hackney turned to look at her. The others crowded in close to hear. Lou quickly whispered her idea.

"That's the slickest trick I ever heard!" commented a rancher. "And if he tries to squawk outa it—" His fingers hooked the butt of his revolver menacingly.

Lou continued to whisper. "I'll go and get the—you-know-what. While I'm gone you boys ante up the six thousand."

"You're a grand girl, Lou," said Hackney, tears in his eyes. "And I think we've cheated the poorhouse."

Lou slipped away from them, on her errand. Hackney took money out of his pocket and laid it on the bar. "One hundred and fifty is mine."

NOBODY wanted to be left out of a sure thing. It didn't take long to raise the six thousand. Shortly, Lou was back with something wrapped in a large muffler. Then they all marched to where Darby was still playing poker.

Hackney's voice had a new defiant ring in it. "Is that cut-the-ace bet still open, my good man?"

"Sure," said Darby casually. "Any time you put up."

The money tumbled out of Hackney's beaver hat onto the table. "If I cut the ace in that deck, we win." Darby nodded at him. "The bet's on. Shuffle the deck."

Darby shuffled it and placed it in the center of the table. Every eye was on Hackney. He turned to Lou. "Let me have it, child."

Lou unwrapped the muffler, took the implement out, and handed it to Hackney.

It was a huge meat cleaver.

Before anyone could move, Hackney brought the cleaver down in a short arc with force and cut the pack of cards in half. His chortle was heard all around the still room. "I cut the ace of spades first crack! I win! Pick up your money, boys!"

There was a big horselaugh on Darby and hands started to claw for the money.

"Hold it!" hollered Darby. He was standing square on his feet. "You gyps! You didn't win! I thought you were cooking up some crooked deal! I palmed off the ace while I was shuffling! You didn't cut it at all! I win!"

He held out his palm to show them the ace of spades nesting safely in it.

Somebody yelled, "Lynch 'im! He's a sharp!"

Hackney held up his hands for silence and his commanding presence numbed the room. "No! We tried to flimflam him, gentlemen, but he showed us all up. I bow to superior wits. Let the man gather up his ill-gotten pelf and be gone."

"Thanks, stranger," said Darby gratefully. He started to scoop the money into a large sack that he had tucked away under his waistcoat. He seemed to have come prepared to take away a sackful.

Darby was starting to bid them all a fond good night when another voice said, "Wait a minute. I'll take that money."

Sheriff Firestriker was elbowing through toward the table. He was fondling the grips of one of his Savage revolvers, in case anyone should try to dispute him. "We're trying to break up games of chance in this town, and all of you know it. The only way we can discourage card sharps is to take their winnings away from them."

Hackney blustered forward. "I'll vouch for the propriety of these proceedings. I am Horatio Hackney!"

"Never heard of you," said Firestriker. "I'll take the money."

Hackney snorted with indignation. "You yourself participated in a game of chance right outside in the street.

A shooting match. If this's your idea of square dealing—"

Firestriker looked around and for an instant his eyes met Lou's. "That was more of a game of skill than chance. There's no skill in here with the cards stacked against you." He grabbed the bulging sack by the throat with his left hand.

"Why don't you give the money back to the men who lost it?" snapped Hackney.

"It's already out of their hands," said Firestriker grimly. "I'm taking it away from this dude, not them."

"What do you think you're going to do with it?" demanded Hackney.

"I'll lock it up in my safe until I turn it over to the mayor and the rest of the town fathers."

"I see that I've missed my calling," said Hackney scathingly. "I should have been a politician. That's the way to grow rich."

"Break it up," said Firestriker, a warning in his voice. "I'm taking this with me. It'll learn all of you a lesson." He walked out with the money and his two guns. Nobody dared hinder him.

HACKNEY looked after the broad retreating back and muttered, "He did that to us deliberately. He's rankling under the shame of losing that shooting match to Lou. Twelve thousand dollars. A juicy morsel right out of the lion's mouth. Firestriker, you bubblebrain, beware the ire of Horatio Hackney when he's aroused. I'll swat you like a fly!"

Lou had been standing close to him. "I'd be careful of that fly, if I were you, Horatio," she said. "He looks as if he's able to swat back."

Late into the night Hackney laid his plans. Early the next morning he called a council of war.

He said irately, "I'm not going to let that marbleheaded sheriff get away with my hundred and fifty dollars."

"And my six thousand!" said Darby bitterly.

"Lou," said Hackney, "right after breakfast I want you to stroll by the lockup. Ah, the very thought of the *calabozo* makes me shudder. Drop in and ask the sheriff for a gun-patch to clean out your rifle barrel. Any excuse to stop. Then go to work on him. I saw the way ox-heart keeps looking at you. He could get sweet on you. You've got to soften him up, bring out his latent gambling instincts. You'll have to bring them out if we're to have any success later."

"He might be married," she said. "What a regretful thought."

"He isn't," said Hackney. "I made inquiries about him."

Lou went to a mirror, wet her finger, and smoothed down her yellow bangs. "You want me to arouse him."

"His gambling instincts," underlined Hackney.

"All right, Horatio, I'll try."

At noon Hackney and Darby entered the sheriff's office. Lou was still there and she was sitting close to Firestriker while he was telling her how he once wiped out a gang of desperadoes although he had a broken arm and a rusty gun that wasn't loaded anyhow.

"Pardon the intrusion," said Hackney politely as Firestriker paused to draw breath. "I would like to speak in behalf of Mr. Darby Waymark, the suffering gentleman on my right. We were both losers last night, sheriff, and I think that it would be sporting of you to permit Mr. Waymark one more chance to recover his money. In my estimation, Mr. Waymark is entitled to it."

Firestriker had come towering to his feet. "You mean you want me to give it all back to him! Not a chance!"

"No, you don't have to give it back to him—if you don't lose."

"What's this about losing?" said Firestriker suspiciously.

"On a turn of the card."

"You won't turn any cards in here," said Firestriker, like a thunderclap.

Hackney was undaunted. He knew

that Lou's shovel-work must have undermined this mere man. "Those men in the El Dorado had the courage to stake everything on the turn of a card last night. Don't tell me that the brave sheriff has to take the money away with his guns like a sneaky bandit. No sir! I refuse to believe what they're whispering about you around town. You're not the sort of clean young American manhod to do that at all."

"I don't gamble," said Firestriker clearly.

"Please," said Lou in a timid, little-girl voice. "They mean well. For *my* sake, Zed."

Stronger men than Firestriker have been whipped by that. "Well," he said grudgingly, "I'll at least listen to you, Hackney."

"Fine. You won't regret it, sheriff. I've already told the El Dorado to send over an unbroken pack of cards. I want you to break the seal right here, sheriff, so that there'll be no flummery. Darby will shuffle, then you will try for the ace. If you cut it, you keep the money. That's the way we played last night."

Firestriker thought about it. While he thought, he was looking at Lou's angelic smile. "All right," he said, "I can be as big a sport as any of you."

A BOY came in with the unbroken pack. Hackney took it, gave the boy a gem of wisdom to treasure, patted him on the head, and sent him home. He gave the deck to Firestriker, who broke it open. Darby took and shuffled it and placed it on the table.

"Now cut," said Hackney. He sat down, completely relaxed. He knew that Firestriker wouldn't turn up the ace of spades even if he cut fifty-one times—because Darby had palmed off the ace in shuffling!

Firestriker took a long moment of decision. His finger tips were a little unsteady. He reached out, divided the pack in half, and exposed the card.

It was the ace of spades!

"By golly!" he crowed. "I did it!"

Hackney felt too ill for immediate comment. Darby's face had a look of sickly pallor. Lou stared. At least she was able to talk. "Oh, Zed!" she cried. "I must have brought you luck!"

"Yeah," said Firestriker, grinning. Foolishly, thought soured Hackney. Firestriker dropped the cards. "You're the prettiest luck charm I ever had, Lou."

"You're making me blush, Zed." Lou daintily hid her face behind her gloved hand.

Firestriker turned back to the two men and his voice got gritty. "That saves me the trouble of opening my safe. I gambled your way and you lost. Now if Mr. Waymark'll do himself a big favor, he'll be out of town before sunset. If I catch him here after that, I'll deal with him like any other scofflaw."

"Oh, I'll go," said Darby hastily. "Gladly. Been a pleasure knowing all of you. Good-by." He tipped his hat and scurried out.

Hackney swept the cards off the table into his pocket. "I'll see to it personally that he leaves town."

"That ought to learn you not to play cards with strangers, Hackney," said Firestriker.

"It certainly does, especially sheriffs." He got up and ran out. He wanted to catch up with Darby.

He overtook Darby three-quarters of the way out of town. He snatched a handful of Darby's coat and snaffled him back. "You imbecile! There wasn't supposed to be any ace of spades in that pack! What's your excuse for not palming? Frostbitten fingers? I want to know before I stand you on your addled head in that horse-trough!"

"Gad!" cried Darby. "Am I losing my mind? I palmed off the ace!" His hand fumbled a card out of his pocket.

Hackney snatched it. "The ace all right!"

"He couldn't have forced another one on us. I was looking."

"I was looking too," puzzled Hackney. "How many aces of spades were in that deck?"

He pulled the cards out of his own pocket and fanned them all out face-up.

Every card was the ace of spades!

"The one-in-a-million deck!" groaned Hackney. "All fifty-two cards printed exactly alike! It won't happen again in a thousand years!"

A gleam of hope was on Darby's pallid face. "We can go back and tell him—"

Hackney flung the cards into the road. "We can't go back. Hairy-chest would throw us both out." He took Darby's arm and led him toward the Raffle House. "We'll have to begin to work on Plan Two."

"Plan Two?"

"That, my charming nincompoop, is where lovely Lou gets kidnaped by the horrible highwayman — Somber Sebastian!"

SOON after, Hackney got Lou up to his suite, sat her down with pen and paper, and made her write as he dictated:

Dearest Zed:

I have been captured by Somber Sebastian. He is holding me for ransom. He is making terrible threats. He says he will release me in exchange for the $12,000 you have in your office safe. He wants you to leave the money in a bag at the old deserted Jessup cabin.

"I know about the cabin," inserted Hackney. "I've scouted around."

Zed, come tonight when the first star is out. Leave the money on the table beside the lighted candle. Blow out the candle and go. Then I'll be returned safely to you. Don't forget to put out the candle. If you fail to follow these instructions, he is going to cut off my ears and send them to you.

And she added on her own:

You can imagine how dissatisfied that would make me, since I can't even stand to have my lobes pierced for earrings.

"That'll do," snapped Hackney. "Sign it, *Your helpless one, Lou.*"

Lou slowly folded up the note and said, "It seems sort of a mean trick."

Hackney glared at her. "On whom? Firestriker or us?"

Lou looked wide-eyed. "On us, of course."

"I wasn't sure," rumbled Hackney.

He made other arrangements swiftly. He hired a closed-in brougham from the local mortician, whose motto was: *Enjoy your grief in privacy.* Hackney drove the curtained carriage himself. He had Lou and Darby concealed inside. He went by the lockup and personally slipped the ransom note under the door.

Then he drove them all out to the lonely Jessup cabin. Near it was the warped wooden skeleton of an eight-fan battle-ax windmill. The cabin was bare, with several large gaping windows and a door off its hinges. Hackney eyed the rickety ladder that led to the loft above.

"Darby," he said, "you hide up in the garret. Firestriker will come and leave the bag of money on this table, then he'll blow out the candle and go. As soon as you hear him leave, come down, grab the money, and join us outside. We'll be covering you all the time from those rocks and cat-claws about forty feet away. I brought a Colt carbine along for that very purpose."

Darby looked nervous. "Do you think Firestriker will try any trickery?"

"Of course he won't. Not with Lou's ears at stake." Hackney looked out the window at the violet sky. "It's almost dark now. He won't be long coming. Light the candle, Darby, then get up there. With the money in our hands, we'll leap into the brougham and depart for the remote."

Lou said, "Won't Zed take after us, hunt us down?"

"No, no. This isn't supposed to be our doing. He'll intensify his search for Somber Sebastian. That's the beauty of it. Stop gabbing. Do you

want him to catch us before we get out of here?"

Darby scrambled up into the loft and pulled the ladder up after him. Hackney and Lou went out to the rocks and catclaws and crouched side by side, the carbine between Hackney's chunky knees.

They waited.

The stars were well out when Hackney heard the foxtrot of an approaching horse. The rider left his mount behind a clump of Joshua trees and walked to the candle-lighted cabin. Hackney saw that it was Firestriker, carrying a morral, a nose bag. Hackney didn't exactly rejoice at the sight of the two guns slapping Firestriker's thighs.

Through the window, they saw the sheriff in the cabin. He put the bulky morral on the table, looked warily around, then slipped out of the cabin again.

Lou whispered in Hackney's ear, "He didn't put out the candle!"

"Must've forgot," replied Hackney rapidly. "Too rattled to remember everything."

THEY heard the horse stir behind the Joshua trees, then it galloped off again, carrying a rider. Hackney started to draw a long sigh of relief —when it snagged in his thick throat. Firestriker had reappeared on foot! The sheriff was skulking back into the lighted cabin, one of his revolvers drawn.

Hackney said, "He's trying to fool the kidnaper. He must've rode out here double-mounted. The other man spurred the horse back to town for reinforcements."

"What'll we do?" squirmed Lou.

"Watch him!"

In the cabin Firestriker had found concealment in the shadow of the large soot-blackened fireplace. He was laying for Somber Sebastian, waiting for the morral on the table to be picked up.

Hackney groaned. "Darby's trapped in there. He must be able to see Firestriker from the attic. But he can't get out with the money. Not while that candle's burning. He might have a chance in the dark."

A thought flashed through his head and he gripped Lou's shoulder. "Lou! You're the best shot in the West! Shoot the candle out from here!" He thrust the Colt carbine into her limp hands.

"I can't." She tried to shove the carbine back.

"Confound it! It's only forty feet. You've hit spinning coins at thirty. If you only come within six inches of the flame, it'll snuff—"

"I'll never come that close, Horatio," she cried weakly.

"Why?" snarled Hackney. "Have you become so smitten with that panther-hipped sheriff that you'll jeopardize my fortune?"

"No, Horatio," she wailed. "It isn't that. I *can't* shoot it out."

He pressed the weapon into her hands. "We've no time to waste on your silly hysterics," he grated. "Start pumping."

With a dry sob, she snuggled the stock against her cheek, rested the barrel firmly on the rock in front of her, and seemed to aim for an eternity. Then she pulled the trigger. The crashing echoes of the shot went caroming through the night. But the candle on the table remained lit.

Hackney couldn't believe his eyes. "Shoot again!"

More bullets *spanged* into the cabin. The candle never went out. There were no answering shots from Firestriker. He was playing possum or biding his time. Lou let the carbine clatter out of her hands.

Hackney stared at her, aghast. "Your aim is gone! You've lost your eye!"

"I never could shoot. Not very well," she whimpered.

"But the trick shooting!"

"I had special rifle cartridges made that were filled with birdshot," she confessed.

"Birdshot? Irish caviar?" Hackney

drew back from her as if she had leprosy. "You've been dishonest!"

There was a sudden ruction in the cabin. Terrified by the shooting, Darby was making a break for it. He came tumbling out of the loft and hit the floor with a bone-jarring wallop. Then he hurtled through the door like a horrified hare.

Firestriker sprang after him. "I'll get you, Darby Waymark!" He took a potshot at Darby's sprinting figure. But Darby was running zigzag, like a Virginia worm fence, and the shot missed.

Hackney drew a shuddering breath of defeat. "Quickly, Lou! Back to the brougham! We'll never get the money this way. I've got to return you to town—and possibly there'll be a reward!"

HACKNEY whipped the carriage horses into town ten minutes before the sheriff arrived. When Firestriker stepped into his office he found them waiting for him. His eyes looked overjoyed when he saw Lou and he stepped forward to bundle her in his arms. They ran together like molasses.

"I thought I might never see you again," he said into her hair.

"Zed," she said, "you would have saved me—"

"If I hadn't," finished Hackney with a broad smile. "You see, I was out for a turn after dinner. I came across the poor child all trussed up in a cave on the far side of town. She told me she'd been abducted by someone called Somber Sebastian. I wanted to stay there and deal with the ruffian when he came back, the way a man should. But this sweet little thing wanted to get to you as soon as possible to relieve your worry."

Firestriker had dropped the bulgy morral on the floor. Hackney artfully peeped inside. It was stuffed with torn-up newspapers.

Firestriker moved Lou gently to one side. "We'll catch Somber Sebastian. I've started half the town looking for him. We know who he is. He won't get far. He's on foot."

"Who is he?" asked Hackney.

"That man you were gambling with —Darby Waymark. I warned you, Hackney."

Hackney closed his eyes for a moment of mournful silence to Darby Waymark, knowing very well that Darby had too much of a yellow streak to be that wanted outlaw. "Well sir! You have Lou safe and sound. By the way, what's the reward?"

"I was too rushed to post one," said Firestriker. "But I was going to offer five hundred for her safe return. Do you want it, Hackney?"

"Five hundred," mused Hackney. Should he take it? He had to get out of Easy Pickin's soon and he had nothing to show for his stay. He'd even lost money. If he accepted the reward—

He suddenly realized that Firestriker was watching him eagle-eyed. The sheriff couldn't be all timber between his ears. Hackney could almost hear what was going on inside the sheriff's head: If Hackney accepted the money, then the chances were that Hackney had engineered this whole thing for gain. He had become suspicious of Hackney anyway. But if Hackney didn't accept the reward, he might decide that his suspicions were unfounded.

Hackney forced a big melting smile. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other. Getting the reward money, I mean. I've always been a bit of a gambler. I'll let a coin decide. All right with you, my good man?"

"Sure," said Firestriker watchfully. "Go ahead and toss."

Hackney laid his Mexican silver dollar on his thumbnail and crooked forefinger. It wobbled up into the air. "Heads I win, tails I lose."

He caught it, flipped it over on the back of his left hand, and looked at it. "Lose," he said with a chuckle.

(Continued on page 76)

Dinero Digs

Exciting Boom Town Novelette

CHAPTER I

JERRY RAMPTON stood by the bar listening to Bull Vespers' drunken voice, as Vespers made disparaging remarks about Rampton's boss.

The bartender leaned toward him. "You going to stand for him talking about your boss that way, Jerry?"

Rampton shrugged. "She told me very plainly, Ed, I wasn't to fight with Emil Buhner or with any of his men. She's going to handle all the trouble herself like she's always done. She's going—"

"This trouble she's not going to

a Desperado's Grave

By Willard Luce

Although Jerry Rampton was rough, tough, and trigger-wise, neither brawn nor bullets alone could beat that sinister boom town setup.

handle by herself, Jerry. You know that."

Bull Vespers was standing on top of one of the poker tables, his heavy, thick voice filling the room. "Just because she's a woman ain't no reason you gotta work for nothin'. Buhner's paying his drivers two hundred a month, and if he can do it, Martha Harding can do it. The Chloride mine is producin' just as much as the Silver Gal, and if you men have got any guts, you'll get what's coming to you," Bull Vespers' voice went on.

"See what I mean, Jerry?" the barkeep asked. "No woman is going to

handle trouble like Bull Vespers is stirring up."

Jerry Rampton nodded. Martha Harding had done all right for herself so far. But she didn't fight this way. She used money, political influence, boycott—but no rough stuff. And it was pretty damn plain that Emil Buhner and Bull Vespers were going in for the rough stuff.

Rampton pushed away from the bar and through the men crowding around Bull Vespers.

Vespers saw him and pointed at him. "There," he said thickly, "is Martha Harding's little office boy! Ask him if the Chloride can pay—"

Jerry Rampton said, "Bull Vespers, you're a damn fool."

Then before Vespers could answer, he drew up his foot and kicked out against the edge of the poker table. The table skidded, tipped. Vespers' feet made crazy, threshing motions as Vespers tried to keep his balance. The table went over. Vespers' huge body crashed down on it, shattering the table to pieces.

THE sudden silence was almost startling in the room, then Bull Vespers roared and started clawing his way out of the broken wreckage. He was a big man, over two hundred pounds. He was boss of Emil Buhner's underground crews, and tough enough to rule them without protest. He came to his feet, throwing half the poker table behind him. His big, homely face spread into a grin.

"For that, Rampton, I'm going to beat you half to death!" He lowered his head and charged.

Jerry Rampton met him halfway. His fists lashed out, finding solid, satisfying targets. There was somehow even a pleasure in Vespers' fists striking his face and body. Too long he had been working under Martha Harding's rule of no fighting, no rough stuff!

With a savage exultation he kept crowding Vespers, pounding him, beating him, forcing him backward. Vespers' foot slipped on a broken piece of the table and he went down. Quickly he rolled over, doubling up his knees and lashing out with his heavy boots against the empty air.

Jerry Rampton laughed. "I don't have to jump you, Bull. I can whip you standing up."

Bull Vespers stared at him, puzzled and a little uncertain. His hand slid out over the floor, closing over a piece of the broken table. Slowly he came to his feet.

Rampton backed up. The stick in Vespers' hand wasn't the best club in the world, but it could still do a lot of damage. Then someone shoved a chair at Rampton. His hands closed over the back and he moved in toward Bull Vespers once more.

Slowly they circled. Vespers made a sudden shift to the right, raising the club above his head. Rampton raised the chair. But Bull Vespers didn't use the club. He dropped it. Hunching over, he came in under the chair, catching Rampton in the stomach with his huge shoulders. The force of his charge slammed Rampton back against the wall.

The air gushed out of Rampton's lungs. The chair slipped from his hands. He doubled over, fighting for air. Then when he felt Vespers' knee coming up, he twisted to get out of the way, only half succeeding.

He was half paralyzed, but he kept twisting around to protect himself from Vespers' knees. Then he felt Vespers drop down on his one knee, felt the mine foreman's hand close over his leg. Vespers' shoulders came up underneath his body.

Fear hit Jerry Rampton then. He had seen Bull Vespers lift a man on his shoulders once before, seen him turn around and around, and then slam the man to the floor, seen the man die an hour later.

Desperately Rampton twisted, trying to wiggle away from Vespers' hands and shoulders. One of Vespers' arms was clamped about the back of his neck. The other one held his legs.

Slowly Rampton felt himself being lifted. His feet left the floor. Higher! Higher!

Still Jerry Rampton twisted desperately. But it was too late now. He had no brace, nothing to push against. Then his feet struck the wall. He doubled his knees and savagely shoved out against it. Bull Vespers staggered beneath him. Rampton kept twisting, kept turning. Then he felt Vespers' arms loosen as the mine foreman completely lost his balance. They both crashed to the floor.

JERRY RAMPTON still needed air. His body was still half paralyzed from the damage Vespers' knees had done to it. But he somehow got to his feet.

Bull Vespers was coming at him again. Almost frantically Jerry Rampton swung at him. It wasn't a hard blow; Rampton didn't have the strength for a hard blow. But it landed squarely on Vespers' nose. It wasn't a damaging blow, but it was painful. It stopped Vespers for one brief moment, then he came on again more savagely than ever.

Somehow Rampton got out of his way. As Vespers' charge carried him past, Rampton swung out with his fist, catching the big man in back of the ear. Vespers sprawled face down on the floor.

He was slower getting onto his feet this time, giving Rampton's strength a chance to return. It was Rampton now who moved in on Vespers. His fists lashed out at the mine foreman's blood-smeared face. He kept lashing out until Bull Vespers slid to the floor unable to climb back onto his feet.

The following morning Jerry Rampton stood in the office of the Chloride Mining Company staring at the slip of paper in his hand. It was a long, purple slip that said: *Released, Pay in Full.* It was signed Martha Harding.

Rampton's lips were puffed and swollen, causing him to grimace when he tried to smile. There was a sort of purple beneath his right eyes, and there was a patch of skin off the side of his jaw that was red and ugly. . . .

Martha Harding sat at her desk looking cool and lovely in her white lawn dress, with a red pencil back of her ear, and that hard-set, business like expression on her face. Jerry Rampton had seen her face when it hadn't been hard-set and businesslike. He had seen laughter in her lovely blue eyes, and he had held the soft curves of her body close against him. He was going to miss being around the Chloride, going to miss it like hell.

Even Martha Harding's voice was businesslike this morning. "I told you when the trouble first started at the mine that I didn't want any rough stuff, Jerry. I meant that. I still mean it. I simply cannot tolerate insubordination. I'm sorry."

Jerry Rampton nodded. He had expected a bawling out maybe for last night's fight, but not this. He had even entertained the notion that she might be pleased with what he had done. But not Martha. She had been kingpin of the Chloride too long. She knew all the answers, and what she said was law.

"I've done all right so far, Jerry," she went on as though somehow she had to explain this to him, "without beating up Buhner's men. As long as Buhner leaves me alone, I'll leave him alone."

Jerry Rampton nodded. He waved the purple slip in his hand. "Thanks, Martha." He opened the door, favoring her with a rueful smile. "I suppose you already know your drivers quit this morning. They told me—"

Martha Harding sprang to her feet. Her eyes blazed as she came around the desk. "Jerry Rampton, this is all your fault! You told me— Jerry Rampton, I hate you. I—I—"

"Now, now, Martha. No rough stuff, remember?" He shook his finger at her. "No rough stuff!"

CHAPTER II

HE WAS enjoying this. Gently he backed out, closing the door behind him. As he went jauntily down the outside steps, he heard her stomping her feet on the wooden floor behind the closed door.

He went on to the pay office and collected his money. On the way out, he stopped on the porch long enough to roll a cigarette and to cast a critical eye over the little mining town of Wildwood. It was a town that a man like Jerry Rampton could love, Wildwood was. Still young, it held an opportunity for a man with enough guts and enough brains to take it.

But it wouldn't be that way for long now. Rampton had lived in a dozen mining towns and he had seen the same things happen to all of them that was now happening to Wildwood. At first, in any new camp, there were many claims and many stores and many business houses. Slowly these claims are brought together under one ownership; then the town becomes a company town.

The company establishes a store, and if you work for the company, you trade at the company store. The company builds houses, and if you work for the company, you rent a company house. As time goes on, the company controls more and more until finally free enterprise dies completely.

Already Emil Buhner owned a third of the business houses in Wildwood. He owned the stage and freight line. He owned the bank. But he still didn't have control of all the mining property. Martha Harding still owned the Chloride, and she was intending to keep it—if she could.

But only the week before, Emil Buhner had raised the pay of his drivers from a hundred fifty a month to two hundred, volunteered the raise—"out of the goodness of his heart."

Jerry Rampton chuckled at that. As far as money went, there was no goodness in Emil Buhner's heart. He loved the stuff; he worshiped it. Whenever a dollar went out of his pocket, it was only to bring two back.

Now as soon as Martha Harding raised her drivers to two hundred, Buhner would raise his miners and his muckers.

When Martha raised hers, Buhner would raise his foremen and his clerks. And the Chloride mine wasn't rich enough to give all its employes a fifty dollar a month raise and still keep off the rocks. Before long Martha Harding would have to borrow money, and when she did, one way or another, Emil Buhner would gain control of the notes.

Before long the Chloride and the Silver Gal would be combined and Wildwood would become a company town like all the others Jerry Rampton had lived in and left.

Rampton shrugged and put a match to his cigarette. What the hell? It wasn't his worry. There would always be another Wildwood over the hill, another Wildwood by some different name. There would always be— But then Jerry Rampton was very tired of looking over the hill for another mining camp that would only in time die out as the last one had.

THEN there were Mike Greiner and a dozen others who were old now and with big families—too old to pick up and head for another strike, too old and too tired and too burdened with responsibility. A company town was hell on men like these.

Then, of course, there was Martha Harding, temperamental and fascinating as a mustang filly. She would make a man a damn good wife—once she was halter-broke.

Jerry Rampton chuckled. Then suddenly he stopped chuckling. Coming across the street was Emil Buhner. It wasn't anything personal; it was just that Ruhner stood for things Rampton despised.

Buhner was a big fellow who wore lamb-chop sideburns and a Prince Albert suit and a tall beaver hat. "Well,

well, Rampton, my friend, I hear you're looking for a job."

"You hear things fast, Buhner."

"It's my business to hear things fast. Last night when you picked that fight with Bull Vespers, I was ready to run you out of town. Today I'm ready to hire you. That's the way mining business is, my friend. It takes a good man to beat up Bull Vespers. I need a good man. What do you say?"

"Who is it that you want me to beat up that you and Bull Vespers can't handle yourselves? Martha Harding, perhaps?"

A deep flush colored Emil Buhner's cheeks. "I didn't stop to be insulted, Rampton. I made you a proposition. Yes or no?" Buhner's voice snapped like a bullwhacker's whip.

"Why, yes, of course—if the pay's right."

"The pay will be two hundred and fifty dollars a month."

Jerry Rampton shook his head. "Let's look at it this way, Buhner. You might kid the others as to what the score is, but you can't kid me. A month ago you lost your ore vein and the Silver Gal was about to go on the rocks. You're hauling high grade again now, but you can't take any chances.

"You need the Chloride. You've never fought Martha Harding, but you've seen a lot of other operators fight her—and lose. No one likes to lose, especially *you* don't like to lose. And in this case the stakes are pretty high, the Silver Gal, the Chloride, and Wildwood itself. You follow me, don't you, Buhner?"

There was a dangerous light in Emil Buhner's eyes that Jerry Rampton couldn't quite understand. If the mine owner had had a gun in his hand, he could have understood it. It was the light of a man ready to kill another man—anxious to kill him.

JERRY RAMPTON shrugged. "All right, Buhner. You know you're on the way out. You want me to save the Silver Gal for you and the Chloride and Wildwood. And all for two hundred and fifty dollars a month!" Rampton was quite amazed at his own nerve, and by the looks on Buhner's face the mine owner was, too. "I'll take your proposition, Buhner, for one-half of everything we save—and get. Half the Silver Gal, half the Chloride, half of Wildwood."

"And I suppose," Buhner sneered, "half of Martha Harding, too."

"No, Buhner, I'll have all of Martha Harding. Don't ever forget that."

For a long moment their eyes locked. Then Buhner whirled around and tramped off like an angry bull, leaving Rampton with the uncomfortable feeling that life in Wildwood was going to get rough. Mighty rough! Mighty quick!

But the day wore on quietly enough. Jerry Rampton spent it playing poker in the back room of the Big Strike. About ten o'clock word came in that Martha Harding had raised her drivers' pay, and ore from the Chloride was once more going down the Wildwood dugway.

Then at two that afternoon word came in that the Silver Gal had raised its miners and its muckers the same as it had its drivers, fifty dollars a month.

Excitement ran pretty high in Wildwood that day, especially among the workers of the Silver Gal and the Chloride. It wasn't every day that a working man got a raise of fifty dollars.

No, it wasn't every day, Jerry Rampton thought. But it doesn't matter how much a company pays you in a company town—they get it all back again. They raise the price of coffee, they raise the price of potatoes, they raise the price of meat. And in the long run they get it all back again.

Jerry Rampton bought another round of drinks.

Shifts in the mines at Wildwood ran twelve hours, from six to six. At five the Big Strike started filling up with miners for the night shift wanting a little nip before going to work.

A fight broke out up front, a little thing really, but it grew. And when it was finally over, there were five of Martha Harding's Chloride miners who wouldn't work that night shift. They weren't hurt badly, just incapacitated.

Rampton thought soberly that this same thing would be happening in every saloon in town. Emil Buhner was really starting to fight the rough way now.

Then at five-thirty a boy brought Jerry Hampton a note. All it said was, *Jerry: I've got to see you, Martha.*

At eight o'clock the same boy brought Rampton another note: *Jerry, I'm still waiting.*

Rampton studied the note and nodded at it as he might have nodded at Martha Harding. "Well, gentlemen, I guess I'll have to leave you."

He pushed his chips across to the houseman and received his money. Then he went out the back door and leisurely up the hill to the office of the Chloride mine.

MARTHA HARDING was alone in the office seated at her desk, staring down at her hands. The pressure was really on her now and there was fear in her eyes.

Rampton put his hands behind his back and leaned on them. This was not the time to go over and put his arms around her. Definitely not!

"What's the matter, Martha? Won't your pals up at the legislature pass a bill against raising a workingman's pay?"

Martha Harding bit her lower lip. "All right, Jerry, I'm sorry. I don't blame you for being angry. You told me all this would happen and I didn't believe you. But it has, and I'm sorry." She stood up and moved around the desk, leaning against it. She had a way of leaning against the desk and looking up at him through her long lashes that made Jerry Rampton push a little harder against his hands. "I—I want you to come back, Jerry. I'll pay you two hundred and fifty a month. I'll—"

"Piker!"

The surprise that hit her face was genuine enough. "But, Jerry, I—"

"Let's stop kidding ourselves, shall we? You've got yourself in a hole and you can't pull yourself out, so you want me to do it for you. And all for two hundred and fifty a month!"

Once more Martha bit her lower lip and Rampton thought she was going to cry. "All right, Jerry. How much do you want?"

Rampton drew a deep breath and plunged. "One half the Chloride! No, fifty-one per cent of the Chloride! I want to be the one to wear the pants in this partnership." His voice was hard and uncompromising.

He might have slapped her in the face, and it probably wouldn't have shocked her half so much It was a thing she could expect from Jerry Rampton—but not this other. She just stood there, staring at him in disbelief.

Finally she exclaimed, "Jerry, you're fooling!"

"Am I?"

"Jerry, I need you, but not that badly. I've done all right so far, but Buhner's starting to use caveman tactics. I can't go out and fight him with my fists. I've got to have a man, a man who knows how to fight. Five thousand dollars, Jerry, if you'll do the fighting, handle the rough stuff. I'll do the rest. I've never needed any help before, but this is different. This—"

"You're damned well right this is different! The pressure is on you this time. Look, for five years you and Buhner have been the two kingpins in Wildwood. Then suddenly he starts cutting your throat. He already knows what happened to King and Morris when they bucked you, so he's been planning this for a long, long time, and he's already stacked the cards.

"Then there's another thing maybe you don't know. Yesterday Buhner tried to buy out the Wildwood Mercantile. When Alan Longstreet re-

fused, Buhner gave orders that none of his men were to trade there. They'd lose their jobs if they did. Don't tell me Emil Buhner's not playing for keeps!"

"I don't care what Emil Buhner's done, Jerry Rampton! You're a fool if you think—"

She stopped and they both heard the sound of boots running along the rough trail outside.

RAMPTON moved away from the door just as boots beat hollowly on the porch. Then the door flew open and one of the mine foremen rushed in.

Mike Greiner jerked off his hat. "I—I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's trouble down at the mine."

"Trouble, Mike?" It was Jerry Rampton who asked the question.

"Yes, Mister Rampton. Bull Vespers is there with a lot of his men. He says our miners and muckers ain't going to work until Miss Harding raises their pay. He says if she don't raise it, then Mister Buhner's going to lower their pay again. Vespers says we can mine and muck all we damn please once our pay is raised, but the workers of the Silver Gal ain't going to work for nothing just so Miss Harding can wear silk petticoats and fancy dresses."

Mike Greiner turned once more to Martha Harding. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, but that's what he said."

There was color on Martha Harding's cheeks and a blazing anger in her eyes. "What right has Bull Vespers got on Chloride property. Why don't you men—"

"Oh, no, Martha!" Rampton clucked and shook his head. "No rough stuff! Remember?"

"Jerry Rampton, sometimes I could kill you!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but the men ain't right anxious to fight just to get to work for fifty dollars less than the men are getting at the Silver Gal."

"I'll tell you what to do, Martha," Rampton offered. "You just run down there and tell Bull Vespers to go on home and mind his own business. Then you tell your men to go in and go to work. They wouldn't want to wear silk petticoats anyway, so what do they need with an extra fifty dollars a month?"

If Martha Harding had been a man, Rampton was sure she would have killed him. He wasn't at all sure but what he should have been killed. But when a man is bluffing on a pair of deuces, he has to bluff all the way.

He just stood there after that with that impish, mocking grin on his lips while hopelessness and helplessness pushed the anger out of her. He saw her lips tremble, and saw her fight desperately to keep from going to pieces.

"All right, Jerry," she said at last, "you win. One half the Chloride."

"Fifty-one per cent, Martha."

"Jerry Rampton! I—"

"Fifty-one per cent, Martha?"

"Yes, Jerry. Fifty-one per cent."

Rampton whirled toward Mike Greiner. "Let's go, Mike!"

He went out the door at a run, knowing the time for bluffing was over now. Only action—rough, hard action—would save the Chloride and Wildwood now.

CHAPTER III

HE CAME up to the mine entrance, puffing from his run. The miners from both the day and the night shifts were there, listening to Bull Vespers' voice telling them what fools they were.

Roughly Jerry Rampton shoved the men aside as he pushed through them to face Bull Vespers.

"You're trespassing, Bull. Take your men and get the hell off Chloride property."

Bull Vespers grinned significantly as he hefted the pick handle in his right hand. "And just who will put me off should I decide to stay?" His

face was swollen and discolored from last night's fight.

Rampton hit him then, hit him with everything he had, just above Bull Vespers' heavy belt buckle. He had seen too many heads smashed in with pick handles to take any chances with a man like Vespers.

"I will!" Then he hit Bull Vespers again.

Bull Vespers staggered backward, savagely swinging the pick handle as he fell.

Rampton was too close to him. He couldn't get out of the way, and the end of the pick handle caught him on the shoulder. His arm suddenly went limp with the pain. He fought against the nausea that came up inside him.

Then he saw Bull Vespers on the ground gathering himself for a rush. Vespers still had the pick handle in his right hand.

Rampton went after him then, before he could gain his feet. He rushed Vespers coming down on him with both knees. Vespers flattened out on the ground with a heavy grunt, all Rampton's weight on top of him.

Rampton smashed him with his good hand, and Vespers lost the pick handle. Rampton smashed him again. He caught up the pick handle and came to his feet. Whirling, he faced Vespers' crew closing in on him.

"Get moving, men, before I cave in a few skulls."

Rampton started toward them and was actually surprised that they backed away from him. But these men had seen him whip Bull Vespers the night before. Vespers had been drunk then, dead drunk. But no other man had ever whipped Bull Vespers, drunk or sober, in fair fight or foul.

And just now they had seen him knock Bull Vespers off his feet and take his pick handle away from him. They were tough men, all of them, with little respect for man or God. But they did respect a pair of hard knuckles or a pick handle. They had a respect, too, for the crew of the Chloride that had moved up behind Jerry Rampton to back his play.

They didn't want any of that, and when Rampton said, "Get!" they got.

Bull Vespers was the last to go. As he left he said, "I'll be remembering this, Rampton. As long as I live, I'll be remembering it."

WHEN Bull Vespers and his crowd had gone down the hill, Rampton turned to the Chloride crew. "Men, I have some news for you—some of it good and some of it bad. First of all, I have just acquired a controlling interest in the Chloride mine."

A shout went up following this announcement. These were men's men. They were tired of working for a petticoat, especially now that labor trouble had developed.

Rampton let the shouting go on for a brief moment before he held up his hand for silence. "Maybe you better let me finish. First of all, how many of you have ever worked in company mining towns?"

Well over half of them had.

"Did you like it?" Rampton almost yelled this at them, and they yelled right back, "No!"

"How would you like to see Wildwood become a company town?"

Their answer left little doubt. They wanted nothing to do with company towns. So Rampton went on, step by step, to show how Wildwood was rapidly moving in that direction. He told them of all the property Buhner already owned. He showed them the timing of Buhner's raise hikes, explaining that many more would ruin the Chloride, forcing it either to borrow or to close down.

"If we borrow, it is very likely that Emil Buhner will buy up the notes. Once this happens, Wildwood is as good as a company town. For that reason, men, there will be no more raises—not, at least, until there is no longer a threat to Wildwood. After that, I don't know. But you men are free to quit if you like, and you will

be free to come back again any time you wish."

With this he turned and went down the hill, knowing some of the men would work and some of them would not. But even those who worked tonight would not work for many nights. Fifty dollars was a tangible thing that all could understand. Wildwood becoming a company town was only a vague future possibility.

It was late when Rampton got back to his cabin. He was tired, dead tired, but he didn't want to go to bed. He rubbed liniment on his arm, then aimlessly moved back and forth across the room.

So far, Emil Buhner had beaten him to every punch. But somewhere there must be a weakness, something he had overlooked. Rampton kept remembering how Buhner had looked at him that afternoon, wanting to kill him. Something he had said had caused that. Something—

Rampton beat his fist against the palm of his other hand. He had to find out what it was! He had to!

Hours later it seemed, Rampton blew out the light and crawled into bed, falling immediately into a troubled sleep

SOMEONE kept pounding on the door. Rampton groaned and opened his eyes. The pounding kept on, and he said into the darkness, "All right. All right. Don't break the damn thing down."

The pounding stopped and a man's voice came through to him, urgent and excited. "Hurry, Jerry! There's trouble at the mine. Miss Harding wants you up there right away."

Trouble! Rampton groaned and swung a foot out of the bed. Trouble —that's what he had asked for. Trouble and half of the Chloride mine.

The cold floor shocked some of the sleep out of Rampton's eyes. Trouble —at this time of night. "Hell," he grunted, "Emil Buhner must be working overtime."

He pulled on his clothes and buckled on his gunbelt. Then as he reached for his hat, it came to him as a sudden shock. The man who had knocked on the door had never left! There had been no sound of retreating footsteps. No—

Carefully Rampton eased the .45 out of its holster. He picked up the pillow from his bed. He was tense now and jumpy. He waited a moment longer for the tenseness to leave, then he crossed the room and pushed open the door. He pushed the pillow out into the night.

Flames leaped out at him from the darkness. The pillow was ripped from his fingers. Then his own .45 hammered out in answer.

Outside, a man screamed, and then Rampton could hear him running, crashing through the oak brush on the hillside. The man was either a fool or a stranger to try for a getaway in that direction.

Rampton yelled out his warning, but it was too late. Already the would-be ambusher had reached the canyon rim. His high-pitched, terrified yell told Rampton that he had more than reached it. He had gone over. Over meant a hundred feet straight down, and after that another fifty feet of talus before the canyon floor.

Rampton took a bottle of whisky from the cupboard and went out through the door, feeling a little sick to his stomach. He had seen men smashed in the mines. This wouldn't be much different.

It took him some time to reach the canyon floor by way of the trail and somewhat longer to find the man halfway up the talus slope. He was glad it was dark, for even in the darkness the man looked horribly broken and twisted. But he was still alive. Rampton gave him a swallow of whisky, feeling him shudder from the effect of it.

Then the man said, "You're Rampton, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm Rampton. And who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm finished,

that's all that matters." The man coughed a little, twisting with the pain it caused. "I'm sorry I tried to plug you up there—but a hundred bucks is a hundred bucks. You understand that, don't you, Rampton?"

"Who paid you the hundred?" Rampton demanded, knowing time was short now.

The gunny seemed amused at this. "You mean you can't guess?"

"I suppose I could guess, but I'd sooner hear it from you."

"Emil Buhner."

"Why?"

"He didn't tell me, but I overheard him and Bull Vespers talking about it. He's afraid you know too much about the vein of the Silver Gal."

"Just what am I supposed to know about the vein of the Silver Gal?" Rampton asked him tensely.

The gunny laughed then, a laugh that choked off in a dry sob of pain. "Hell, Rampton, if you don't know what you're supposed to know, how the hell do you expect me to know?"

THERE was more to what the man said before he died, but none of it helped to clear up the puzzle in Jerry Rampton's mind. He was supposed to know something about the vein of the Silver Gal, but he didn't know anything that everyone else in Wildwood didn't know. A month before, Buhner had run into a fault and lost the vein. It had been an expensive job locating it once more. But now that it had been located, ore from the Silver Gal was even richer than it had been before.

Even richer—

Jerry Rampton suddenly stood up, excitement pushing at him. That must be it! That had to be it!

Emil Buhner's Silver Gal joined the Chloride on the east. The Chloride had always produced richer ore than had the Silver Gal, and it seemed that the farther west the vein was dug, the richer the ore became. For this reason Emil Buhner had cleaned out his vein right to the line joining the two properties, while Martha Harding had dug away from the property line in the direction of the richer ore.

Emil Buhner had not rediscovered his lost vein. He was pushing his tunnels into Chloride property!

Since Buhner did his own engineering, he could do this with none of his crew being the wiser. Few miners know or care anything about property lines. They dig where they're told to dig, and that was that.

This would account for the greater amount of silver in Buhner's ore. It would also account for his forcing the fight with the Chloride at this time, since he couldn't possibly hope to continue digging on Chloride property without discovery.

Jerry Rampton moved rapidly down the talus to the canyon trail and back up the trail to his cabin. He pushed open the door, then suddenly stopped halfway inside, startled by the light that was in the room.

Martha Harding's voice came to him. "Come on in, Jerry. I'm your partner, remember? I won't bite."

"I wouldn't bet on that." Rampton moved over to the cupboard. He pushed the spent shell out of the .45, replacing it with a fresh one. He dropped a box of .45s in his coat pocket.

After this he turned back to Martha Harding. "Look, honey, why don't you run on back home? I've got work to do."

Martha was looking at the gun, staring at it. "The shooting I heard—"

"The shooting you heard was here. The other fellow's down the canyon—dead."

"Jerry!" She came up to him, clutching his lapels and holding her body close to his. "Jerry, isn't there some other way? I hate fighting, Jerry! I hate killing!"

"Look, honey." Rampton reached out and took her arms in his hands. He knew why she so hated physical violence; her father had been killed in a fight five years before right here in Wildwood. He spoke gently. "It's

too late for your kind of fighting now. Let me handle this my way."

"Then I'm going with you. I'm going to help you."

"Martha, you can't!"

"And just why not? I own half the Chloride—almost half of it anyway—and I can fight for it just as much as you can."

Rampton argued with her, pleaded with her, but it was no use.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS nearly a half-mile to the entrance of the Silver Gal. Rampton and Martha hurried over the rough hillside, knowing that daylight was not far away.

When they finally reached the tunnel, Rampton was surprised that there was no guard. Maybe Buhner had had too much confidence in his hired killer. Maybe Jerry Rampton had guessed all wrong. Maybe there was no need for a guard.

Rampton shrugged. It wouldn't take them long to find out one way or another.

They moved into the entrance, and Rampton worked with a carbide lamp until he had it going. He had moved along a thousand tunnels like this one, damp and musky and black. But somehow this was different. He was tense and jumpy, fighting every shadow with the lamp, stiffening at every sound. Before he had gone any distance, his muscles ached from the nervous tension.

The tenseness was in Martha Harding, too. Her breathing was short, quick. Her fingers dug into his arm.

She whispered, "Jerry! Jerry, why don't we get Sheriff Dixon down here? He gets paid to find out things like this."

"We can't, Martha, not until we know we're right. We'd have to swear out a search warrant. If we should be wrong, Emil Buhner would sue us for everything we've got. No, Martha, we've got to do this ourselves."

He took her arm and they moved on.

A hundred yards down the tunnel, Rampton stopped and listened. Faintly he could hear the sounds of men working.

"Martha! You hear it, don't you?"

"Yes, I hear it."

Rampton started ahead again, almost running now. These sounds could hardly mean but one thing—his guess had been right. The vein Emil Buhner had lost a month ago had not been this near the surface. It had been deeper in the earth, far deeper.

Gradually the sounds grew louder, closer. Rampton was sure he was right now. He knew he was right!

At last they reached the drift and stopped. It was a new drift with men working at the end. It took off to the right while all the others had taken off to the left.

It went westward into Chloride property!

Rampton wanted to yell. He wanted to throw his hat to the roof and howl like a Comanche. He did grab Martha into his arms and kiss her as he had never kissed her before.

"This is it, honey! This is it!" he whispered. "Now let's get out of here before it's too late."

They turned back toward the mine entrance, almost running. It suddenly seemed colder. Water kept dripping from the roof, and their feet made sharp splashing sounds against the thin layer of it along the tunnel floor.

It seemed farther now, too, as though they would never reach it.

THEN quite suddenly the fresh night air hit them. Rampton breathed deeply as he stepped out into the night and was surprised that it was still dark. It seemed that they had been in the mine for hours. Surely it must have been longer—

The crash of the gun came close at hand. Rampton felt the hot rush of air and heard the thump as the lead buried itself in the timber behind them.

With a savage, automatic swing of his arm, he flung the lamp from him. Ducking low, he caught Martha's hand and raced along the edge of the hill, his heart hammering.

There were two guns yammering at them now—three.

Then suddenly Rampton's leg buckled. He hit the dirt face-first, feeling the sting of rocks cutting at his flash, tearing it. Dirt geysered up into his mouth and he tried to spit it out.

"Go on!" he yelled at Martha. "Go on!"

But Martha Harding had stopped and was stooping down. Her hands caught him underneath the armpits.

"Go on, before they get us both!" Rampton's voice was harsh.

"Hush up, Jerry. There's an old tunnel here somewhere!"

It was downhill and Jerry tried to help with his one good foot and his hands. But he didn't help much. Then Martha stumbled. Rampton heard her cry out, then they were both tumbling and rolling. The world suddenly seemed to drop away from them. Rampton landed first and all the air suddenly went out of him. He heard Martha cry, "Jerry! Jerry, I told you!"

She caught him by the arms again, and he felt himself being dragged back into the tunnel entrance. He knew it now, it was an old prospect tunnel. He thought, *What a hell of a place for a Mexican stand-off!*

He reached for his gun, and went suddenly cold. The holster was empty.

Emil Buhner was not a killer, but he loved money. He worshiped it. If Jerry Rampton knew the man as he thought he did, Buhner would kill for money where he might not kill for anything else.

And Bull Vespers—Bull Vespers would kill a man just for the hell of it.

Rampton reached up and pulled Martha down against him. His lips found hers and he kissed her savagely, knowing only too well that this might be the last chance he would ever get.

She rubbed his nose with hers. "You're a nice partner, Jerry," she whispered. "The nicest partner I ever had."

FROM outside came the sound of boots running over the dry earth. With the sound a sudden bitterness came over Jerry Rampton. He cursed himself for letting her get into this. With himself it was different. He had asked for it, demanded it.

The sound of the boots came closer. Rampton pushed her away. "Sure," he said. "Sure. Some day maybe we can continue it in hell."

Bull Vespers' voice hit them from the outside. "Well, well, trespassers!"

"You better come out, Rampton," Emil Buhner urged. "If you don't, we'll come in after you."

Rampton shivered. With his wounded leg and without a gun, they wouldn't have a chance. He said, "Buhner—"

"Oh, so it is Rampton like we thought? The high-and-mighty Jerry Rampton! The tough Jerry Rampton—and he's crawling!" Bull Vespers laughed with the laugh of an insane man. "I told you I wouldn't forget it, Rampton! I told you, didn't I?"

"Buhner," Rampton repeated, "I thought you might like to know. Martha Harding is in here with me."

"No!" There was the sound of a sharp scuffle. Emil Buhner's frightened voice pleaded. "Wait, Bull! Wait!"

"Get away from me, Buhner. I'm going in." There was the sound of a blow, and the scuffle stopped. "I told you you were sweet on that Harding female, didn't I, Buhner? That's why you let her alone until we lost the vein and had to have the Chloride property. Said you didn't like fightin' a woman! Hell, you were just sweet on her and thought you could marry her and get the Chloride that way. Well, you ain't backin' out on Bull Vespers and Johnny Goth now. Is he, Johnny?"

Rampton heard the third man grunt. Then Bull Vespers spoke again. "We're coming in, Rampton!"

Jerry Rampton's mouth was dry. Once they got in—

"Come right ahead, Bull. Come right ahead!" Rampton tried desperately to make his voice sound confident. "I've got a stick of powder here. As soon as you get inside, I'm going to light it. Then we can all go to hell together!"

There was a brief silence, then Vespers said, "You wouldn't dare, Rampton."

"No? You're going to kill us anyway, Bull, so why wouldn't I?"

Again there was a short silence, and afterward the sound of retreating footsteps. "All right, Rampton. I guess two can play at the same game. I've just sent Johnny for some powder."

Beside him Rampton heard Martha Harding gasp. He had one quick horrible thought of what the powder would do to her—to her face, to her body.

SAVAGELY Rampton forced himself to his feet, as he heard the sound of Johnny Goth coming back. Pain, like hot needles, shot up and down his leg. For a long moment he stood there fighting against the pain and the nausea.

There was still a chance, one slim, vague chance.

"What you waiting for, Bull? Want to borrow a match?"

"Never mind, Rampton."

Light made its glow at the mouth of the tunnel. "I'm going to wait until this burns short, Rampton, very short."

Jerry Rampton laughed. He was thankful for the echoes that beat along the tunnel. They disguised the terror that was in it. He called out, "Don't let it burn your fingers, Bull!"

Down the tunnel he saw the vague, faint outline of Bull Vespers. Like a firefly on a dark night he could see the end of the fuse in Vespers' hand. It twisted and turned as Vespers drew it back. Twisted and turned, then it came sailing straight toward Jerry Rampton.

"Good heavens!" Rampton whispered. "Good heavens!"

Then his hands shot out, closing over the stick of powder in the air. He stared down at the fuse, sputtering, spitting, burning only a hairsbreadth, it seemed, away from the giant cap.

Jerry Rampton took a staggering, pain-filled step toward the entrance.

"How do you like it, Rampton?"

Rampton took another step. Two more. Three.

Then he yelled and threw the fuse from him, not daring to hold it longer. His breath kept sobbing in and out as he stared, fascinated, at the firefly turning over and over in the blackness. He was vaguely conscious of Buhner screaming, "Lookout, Bull!"

Then the world seemed to come apart with a blinding flash and a roar that seemed to shatter Rampton's eardrums. Dirt trickled from the roof.

It was the explosion that brought Jerry Rampton out of it. He jerked ahead, stumbling out of the tunnel.

It was a little lighter now. Rampton stopped and stared down at what he saw on the ground. All three men had been close to the powder when it exploded. Damn close to it.

A little sick, Rampton moved back into the tunnel. Martha Harding was standing there waiting and he said, "Let's get out of here."

She nodded. Clutching his arm, she moved with him. As they moved outside, she turned her head and looked at the hillside, not wanting to see what was on the ground.

Later Jerry Rampton would bring a doctor back with him. Sheriff Dixon could be brought into this now, too. But the important thing was that the Chloride was safe—and Wildwood.

Rampton glanced down at Martha. He wasn't at all certain that she was entirely halter-broke yet, but she was certainly leading nicely.

Hot Trail to Sonora

By Nat McKelvey

A true story about an intrepid pioneer whose blazing bullets helped make frontier history.

IN THE fields of fertile Rancho Potrero, Mexicans and friendly Opata Indians labored over the crops of Don Pedro Kitchen, most valiant of men. A bright copper morning sun warmed the rows of cabbages, potatoes, and melons, struck fire from the waving fields of grain, danced through acres of fruit trees.

On this day in 1860, the lush Santa Cruz Valley of Arizona seemed the personification of peace. Birds sang lustily, dogs barked at play, and the drone of worker bees filled the clean air. Only the stacked rifles of the men in the fields and the pair of pistols at each man's belt seemed off-key in this desert paradise.

From the big adobe house on the hill, a few hundred yards away, Pete Kitchen himself peered with satisfaction across his productive acres. Besides the fields of growing food, he had his pastures of fat steers, his pens of pigs, and his corrals of milk cows. He had also his loving wife, Dona Rosa, and his fine young stepson, Crandall. Even now, twelve-year-old Crandall, yearning to learn his father's business, watched the dark-skinned field men till the soil.

Suddenly, in one breath, the hoarse cry of a lookout shattered the peace of the fields.

"Vienen los diablos!" screamed the Mexican. "Here come the Apache devils!"

Instantly, workers dropped shovels and hoes, grabbed rifles, and took what cover they could find. Across the even rows of garden truck, howling, painted Apaches swarmed, unleashing arrows as they ran.

Young Crandall Kitchen looked around in panic. Unarmed, he could not fight. Surrounded, he could not flee. The spang of rifle bullets and the soft swish of arrows played a death dirge. The boy was crossing himself, after the manner of his religion, when an arrow struck him down, dead.

At the big house, Pete Kitchen was not idle.

"Dona Rosa," he shouted. "The

rifles. Make ready the rifles, pronto!"

Knowing that he could trust his wife to maintain the household arsenal for his men, now falling back toward the fortlike ranch building, Kitchen, fully armed, dashed toward the battlefield. Even as he ran, he saw he was too late to save his son. The boy lay dead, the ranch hands were in retreat, the day seemed lost.

Yet Pete Kitchen, wise in the ways of life and death on the frontier, knew a few tricks. His slitted, gray-blue eyes swept the countryside, searching for the Apache lookout. If he could find and eliminate that man, the other Indians would quit, having lost the eyes of their tactical operation.

Quickly, Kitchen spotted the watcher, nearly six hundred yards away, mostly concealed by a huge boulder. Against his square jaw Pete laid the stock of his rifle, his drooping mustache caressing the breach mechanism. Pete Kitchen aimed carefully, his thin lips tight. He squeezed the trigger. Behind the rock, the Indian took the bullet full in the face, leaped high, yelled, and collapsed in death.

THE abrupt end of the battle found only the boy, Crandall, a casualty on Kitchen's side. With the rifles of his day, Kitchen's deadly accuracy at six hundred yards represented a skill shared by few frontiersmen.

"I aimed six inches over the varmint's head," Kitchen explained. "At that range, the bullet would drop that much."

In Arizona, from 1854 to 1895, the personality of Peter Kitchen relentlessly wrote frontier history. A newspaper of the day declared: "Not to know Pete Kitchen is to acknowledge one's self unknown."

Historians have called Kitchen "the connecting link between savagery and civilization." He is said to have met and vanquished the Apache more often than any other settler. Compared with Daniel Boone, Kitchen stood out favorably. He was revered as a kind, courageous protector by all who knew him.

The pioneer, John A. Rockfellow, said of Kitchen: "He was one of the best men I have ever known and, next to my daddy, I loved him."

To the Apache Indian, the renegade, the bandit, and the horse thief, Pete Kitchen was "more terrible than an army with banners." His justice was swift, sure, and, on occasion, sly.

Three bandits once ran off several of Kitchen's best horses, driving them south into the Mexican state of Sonora. Mounted on his skewbald bronc, Kitchen took trail, his florid face even more flushed by determination for revenge.

Around his shoulders Kitchen wrapped a serape to keep out the night chill. On his head sat a wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero. His spare figure—he was only five feet nine inches tall—forked the skewbald bronc lightly as man and horse cold-trailed into Sonora.

Pete Kitchen overtook the bandits. One he killed. One fled. The other became Kitchen's captive.

"Up you go, amigo," Kitchen ordered, indicating one of the stolen horses. When the man had mounted, Pete tied his hands securely behind his back, placed a rope around his neck, holding the free end himself. The stolen horses, the captured thief, and Pete Kitchen made a strange procession, winding the back trail to Rancho Potrero.

When Pete reached the ranch, he was alone, except for the horses.

"I got sleepy," he explained to his friends. "So I made camp under a big tree. I left the bandit on the horse and I tied the other end of the rope around his neck to a limb of a tree." Pete's eyes snapped with merriment, his wide, straight nose dilating. "You know," he finished, "while I was asleep, that damned horse walked off and left that fellow hanging there!"

Peter Kitchen was born in Covington, Kentucky, in 1822. As a young man, in 1846, he joined the army and

fought against Mexico in campaigns along the Rio Grande. At the end of the war, he marched all the way to Oregon with his regiment, the Mounted Rifles. There he received his discharge.

He drifted south to California, before the shine was off the gold rush, and dug and panned a bit of gold. But mining was not for Pete. In his veins raced the blood of pioneer farmers and ranchers. So, to the fecund valley of Santa Cruz, Arizona, Pete came, late in 1853 or early in 1854, ahead of the Gadsden Purchase. In other words, Kitchen settled in Mexican territory.

FIRST in everything, it was natural that Kitchen should be among the first to claim the hamlet of Tucson for the United States, following signing of the Gadsden Purchase. Pete and a few other Americans hoisted the American flag over Tucson even before the United States Dragoons could arrive to take official possession for Uncle Sam.

The Mexicans of Tucson and the valley loved Pete. Whenever he brought a load of produce to the old Pueblo, a Mexican drum corps would escort him from the outskirts to the market spot. His Latin friends never tired of bragging of Kitchen's prowess. They said of Pete:

"Don Pedro, muy valiente, muy bueno con rifle!" (Don Pedro, very valiant. Very good with a rifle!)

As a warning, Kitchen once dropped a rifle ball into the back door of a neighbor's house, a mile away. Even more notable than this feud sharpshooting was the affair of Kitchen and the MacArthurs.

John MacArthur and his brothers, Archie, James, and Bill, builders of the Suez Canal and the Chicago Drainage Canal, came West to hunt and rest. As guests of Pete Kitchen, they spent their days riding, trailing, and shooting. Once John and Jim got into a friendly argument about who could shoot more accurately. To settle it, they placed a pebble on a watermelon, their goal to shoot off the pebble without touching the melon.

John tried and failed. Then Jim stepped up. "Watch this," he boasted, drawing a bead on the pebble with his .32 revolver.

In the background, from the doorway of his ranch house, Pete Kitchen watched in amusement. By his side, against the door frame rested his rifle. Slowly, Pete raised the gun to firing level and waited.

Jim MacArthur, with the showmanship of a vaudeville artist, rested his pistol across his left forearm, sighted, squeezed the trigger. The small pebble shattered into a thousand shards, while brother John stood open-mouthed.

"You see," Jim gloated. "Now you know who is the crack shot around here."

For a time, though, neither of the brothers actually knew—not until Pete Kitchen decided to reveal that he had plucked the pebble from the watermelon with a bullet from his rifle.

When Kitchen established his ranch at the junction of Potrero Creek and the Santa Cruz River, the surrounding country was as wild and desolate as the devil's own kingdom. Already the Apaches had killed enough persons in the area to have made ties for a railroad from Nogales to Potrero. The road to Sonora was truly, as Kitchen liked to say: "Tucson, Tubac, Tumacacori to Hell."

Pete built his adobe house on a rocky summit. Around the roof he constructed a parapet containing rifle slits. Inside, he maintained an armory that would have done credit to a government fort.

The Apaches killed Kitchen's pigs and cattle, drove out his neighbors, murdered his herder and his stepson. But they could not dislodge Pete. In 1861, when federal troops withdrew from southern Arizona, Kitchen stayed on, the only settler to challenge the Indian menace successfully.

Kitchen's ranch became a minia-

ture feudal empire, a community complete in itself. Ten persons, mostly nieces of Kitchen's Mexican wife, lived at El Potrero—Pasture Land Ranch. To serve them the pioneer installed his own commissary, blacksmith shop, saddle and wagon shop.

KITCHEN sold such produce as grain, potatoes, cabbages, fruit and melons, plus lard, bacon and ham in stores from Nogales to Tucson and as far east as Silver City, New Mexico. In 1872, he earned $10,000 from ten acres of potatoes, fourteen thousand pounds of bacon and ham, five thousand pounds of lard.

The day of Pete Kitchen was a time of change and violence. In 1860, Pete was on hand for the founding of Arizona's first newspaper, published at Tubac on a hand press freighted to the territory from Cincinnati on a wagon. As for violence, the Mexican government was, at that period, paying a bounty for dead Apaches. It was not uncommon, therefore, to see long strings of Apache ears drying in front of ranch houses, absolute proof that their owners had gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

Kitchen's ranch boasted its own boot hill graveyard, containing the bodies of murdered friends and relatives. It also cloistered the earthly remains of two bandits whom Kitchen caught, hung, and buried.

Dauntless Pete feared no bandit, however bold. Like most pioneers, Kitchen had a sixth sense for danger. Once while riding on a cattle-buying trip into Sonora, Kitchen thought he saw a movement in the mesquite brush ahead of him. He pulled up cautiously, revolver in hand, just in time to receive a rough greeting from a mounted, masked cowboy.

"Throw up your hands," the stranger ordered, "and hand over your money."

"Throw up your own hands!" Pete countered calmly. "I'm in the same game and want your money."

The startled bandit, undoubtedly an amateur, complied hastily, dropping his gun. According to some accounts, Kitchen took all the money the man had, a dollar and a quarter, returned the quarter and ordered the fellow to "git" and never return. Others say he proposed that he and his would-be malefactor pool their resources and proceed to Magdalena for a big drunk. The proposition, accord-

ing to this version, was accepted, Pete contributing a dollar and a half to the pot.

Whenever Pete Kitchen came to Tucson to sell his produce, he camped in the public market, a veritable carnival for atmosphere. Vendors from Mexico came to this spot west of Tucson, on the banks of the Santa Cruz. In selling their frijoles, chili, panocha, fruits and grain, they vied with Kitchen. But in offering caged parrots for sale they had a monopoly. Every transaction was made to the accompaniment of the bells of St. Augustine cathedral, the barking of mongrel dogs and the creaking of swinging saloon doors.

Fond of children, Kitchen, on these Tucson trips, would always seek out little Atanacia Santa Cruz, later the wife of Sam Hughes, to give her candy. Every year, too, he presented her a piglet for a pet.

ABOUT 1880, when the railroad came to Arizona, Pete moved to Tucson to retire. He sold his ranch to one Col. Sykes for $60,000, which he spent in reckless abandon at faro and roulette, in the saloons, or in the crude theaters of the Old Pueblo.

If a performer pleased Kitchen, he would stand up in his box, bellowing his applause. Then, without warning, he would fling handfuls of silver dollars on the stage, demanding an encore.

Kitchen's success as a man and as a rancher stemmed from such personal qualities as his ability to surround himself with competent employees. One such, Cowboy Henry, once won a bonus from Pete because of a bold strategy.

While riding along a lonesome trail, chousing out Kitchen steers, Henry heard the swish of a lariat and felt the noose fall around his shoulders. Before the coil could tighten, Henry whisked it off, took a dally with it around his saddle horn, and spurred his bronc.

From ambush a startled, screaming Apache came hurtling through the air, his body kicking up dust as Henry dragged him. Abruptly the cowboy reversed his field, galloping back to the Indian. Before the Apache could scramble to his feet, Henry grabbed him by the hair, and, with his bowie knife, slit the savage's throat.

Don Pedro Kitchen applauded Henry's quick thinking and effective action. Afterward, Cowboy Henry became a favored hand.

As the years rolled along, Kitchen's great physique began to weaken. Several times his spleen failed to function and he lay near death. On one such occasion, he was attended by Dr. Handy and his bosom friend, Fred Maish, owner of the Palace Saloon. Fred, who lacked in education what he made up in generosity, went about Tucson telling folks:

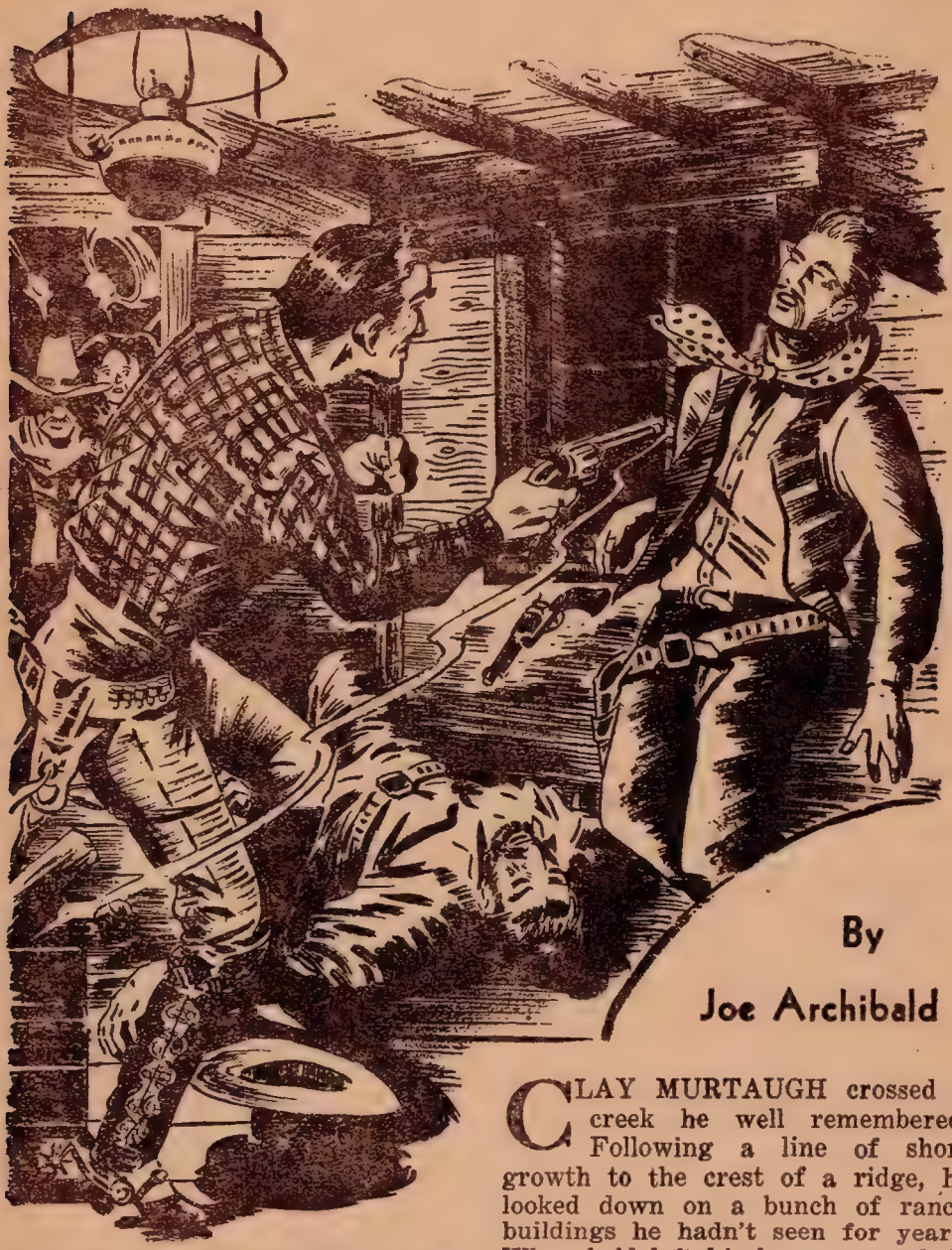
"It's Pete's screen. He has a very bad screen. He may not live too long!"

On August 5, 1895, the Maish prophecy came true. At the age of seventy-seven, Pete Kitchen rode off the earth to a more kindly range. His funeral, for which the Arizona Pioneers Historical Society paid forty dollars, was a tremendous event. According to the Arizona *Star*, Pete's funeral was "one of the largest of any seen in Tucson." Proof of Kitchen's popularity can be seen today in a carefully preserved, black-edged funeral notice, printed in both English and Spanish.

To the end, Pete Kitchen stood for justice. In his will, he left only twenty dollars to James Benedict, his twenty-one-year-old adopted son. "When, in my old age, I could have used his help," Kitchen said in his last testament, "he refused to render such services."

Pete Kitchen did more than any one man to bring law to Arizona. He did more than any one man to remove the danger from the road: "Tucson, Tubac, Tumacacori to Hell."

Yesterday's Badman



By

Joe Archibald

Clay Murtaugh, yesterday's badman, was doomed to become tomorrow's dead man.

CLAY MURTAUGH crossed a creek he well remembered. Following a line of short growth to the crest of a ridge, he looked down on a bunch of ranch buildings he hadn't seen for years. When he'd left his home range he'd sworn never to return, but there is something about the place of a man's birth that continually pulls at him no matter how far he chooses to roam.

There were a few sweet memories

here along with the bitter. A mile back of the ranch house that now badly needed paint, his mother was buried. And there had been a girl named Laura.

The 3 Bar seemed to be falling apart at the seams. Three men were standing out in front of the bunkhouse, and another slouched near the corral that held seven horses. Murtaugh guessed his father would be up at the house that was nearly hidden by a clump of cottonwoods, but he had no intention of finding out. It would only open an old wound and start it bleeding.

Murtaugh swung his blue roan around and followed the curvature of the ridge to a drop-off that brought him out to the Sage City road. He wondered how many people in the cattle town would recognize him. His hair had been much lighter in those days, he'd always shaven clean, and his eyes hadn't held a certain hard brightness. Murtaugh now wore a close-clipped mustache, his hair was long, and he'd acquired a thin white scar that started under his right eye and reached across his cheekbone toward his ear.

For the past eight years Murtaugh had been a man both good and bad. His badness would break loose when he'd taken too much time out to remember that day when five thousand dollars had been stolen from the safe in his father's office. George Murtaugh had brought the cash back from Benton's Siding, the profit from a herd his punchers had delivered. Since it had been too late to bank the money in Sage City, he'd kept it at the ranch house overnight. After having heard noises in his cubbyhole office and come out to investigate, a sixgun had hit him hard.

The people in Sage City hadn't looked upon young Clay Murtaugh's affair with a certain girl in Cohalan's Dance Hall with much favor. Her name had been Tina and she'd had hair and eyes as dark as Cohalan's reputation. She had disappeared from Sage City the morning after George Murtaugh had been robbed.

Nearly a day later they'd found Clay Murtaugh in an old line cabin. A bottle practically drained of its contents was in the bunk with him. His father had shown him something he'd dropped near the safe when they'd brought him back to the 3 Bar—a watch charm he'd given his son for Christmas.

Murtaugh never had been able to get his father's words out of his mind. "You were goin' to run away with that girl at Cohalan's, you drunken bum, so you took that money and nearly brained your own father. Somehow she crossed you and lit a shuck by herself. I'd like to throw you in jail, but there's a woman's memory to consider. I want her to rest as quiet as she can. Get off this ranch an' never come back."

MURTAUGH hadn't said much in his own defense, the evidence had been that conclusive. He hadn't told them all he'd become friendly with Tina because of Laura's attitude. She had kept him dangling by her little finger while she played up to his father's ramrod, Steve Kirkland. Clay knew they wouldn't believe him even if he'd said he'd lost that watch charm over a week before the money was taken.

Ferd Mostil had lied when he'd said he hadn't been in that line cabin with him at the time of the robbery. Why, it had been Ferd who'd found him in Sage City that night. Clay had been pretty upset about Laura so Ferd had suggested that they take a ride and get his mind set to rights. Ferd had had the bottle on him.

Clay Murtaugh could feel that terrible taste in his mouth again, and the splitting headache he'd had when they'd found him. He had never touched anything stronger than lemon soda ever since.

He regretted not having made a firmer denial and seen it through, as he came in sight of Sage City. The

place hadn't changed much. There were a few more false fronts and small frame houses, and now they had a new church. Clay rode slowly down the street and dismounted in front of the hardware store. He looked across the street at a big sign that still read: *Cohalan's*. The center of amusement looked more prosperous than ever, he thought.

A few moments later he walked into the saddler's and saw that Kel Sloat was still at his skiving block. The tall slender man eyed him casually for a moment, then proceeded to finish what he was doing.

"Be with you in a minute, friend," he said.

"Take your time, Kel," Murtaugh said. "I've got a lot to spare."

Sloat's head snapped up. He came toward Murtaugh, his old eyes searching. "You're a mite familiar," he said, "But I can't place you."

"Keep tryin'," the puncher said. "You were about the only man didn't believe it at the time."

Sloat finally said, "Clay, it's you sure enough," and thrust out his hand.

"It never got cleared up?" Murtaugh asked as he sat down.

The saddler shook his head. "You sure have changed, Clay. I guess I knew you better'n most men, but you had me stumped for a minute." His eyes fell to the gun that Murtaugh wore low at his hip. The holster was thonged down. "Figure it's too late to wipe up spilt milk."

"That wasn't in my mind," Murtaugh said stiffly. "I don't guess Ferd Mostil is around now. I was nineteen then, Kel, an' wasn't much with a gun. There was fear in me, so I run."

"Why did you come back?" Sloat asked.

"Curiosity, I figure," Murtaugh said. "I rode past the 3 Bar. It looks run down."

"Owned by a man named Beidler," Sloat said. "A two-bit outfit now."

"Dad?" Murtaugh asked. "Where did he—"

"I've been hopin' you heard, Clay," the saddle maker said. "He was gunned down about a year ago. Been a wild bunch workin' the valley and a lot of stock has been stolen. They found him about fifty yards away from the warm ashes of a wide-looper's fire. Beidler happened along about four months ago and bought it. Practically for the back taxes. After you went, Clay, your pa didn't show too much interest in cattle or anythin' else. I always had a suspicion he regretted accusin' you."

"Laura Winton?" Clay asked, when he threw some of the shock out of him.

"Married Steve Kirkland," Sloat said. "He left the 3 Bar about a year after you did. Got himself a small ranch over by Whisperin' Creek an' he built it up mighty well. Why, I saw Laura pass the shop not more'n five minutes ago."

"Well, now," Murtaugh said, his lips stretching. "No longer any use to sweeten up an old romance. Lookin' back, I never knew Kirkland was a savin' man."

"Laura got some money when her uncle died, I heard," the saddle maker said. "Look, Clay, Steve's well liked an' I wouldn't let my imagination or an old grudge send me off half-cocked."

"I'll take the advice for now," Murtaugh said, and left the shop.

HE WENT along the walk to Cohalan's and stepped through the ornate batwings. Cohalan happened to be leaning against the bar talking to his bartender.

Murtaugh said bluntly, "Hello, Jim."

"You have me at a disadvantage, friend," Cohalan said, his words smoothly polished.

"Clay Murtaugh, Jim. Tell me, did you ever hear from Tina?"

Cohalan's eyes widened. "I remember," he said. "Sometime afterwards I was told she ran off with a store drummer. Let me offer you a drink."

"Thanks, Jim, but I haven't tasted

it since that night," Murtaugh said, then turned and walked out.

He was about to cross the street in front of the hotel five minutes later when he saw the thin woman come out of the dry good's store. He had never forgotten the powder-blue of Laura's eyes or the fullness of her lips, the way she'd always walked with her head back and her shoulders straight. She did not seem so tall now, there were hollows in her cheeks, and her carriage was not as proud. He stepped toward her and spoke her name. As Kel Sloat had done, she studied him for several moments before an old familiar light came into her eyes.

"Clay Murtaugh!" Laura Kirkland said, reaching out a hand to him. It fell on his arm and then quickly jerked away. When Murtaugh saw her lips draw taut, he thought, *She is not a happy woman.*

"You shouldn't have come back," Laura said. "Why did you run away?"

"I was mighty young, remember?" Murtaugh said a little cruelly, "an' plenty scared an' in love with a girl who seemed to fancy somebody else."

"Please," the woman said. "Don't make things worse for me."

"What's so bad already?" he asked, knowing now that one memory would never nag him again.

"I've said enough. I have to be going," Laura said in a voice that threatened to break. "Don't ever try to see me."

"I figure it'd only be the right thing to stop by and say hello to Steve," Murtaugh said. "After all, he was my father's foreman. I don't aim to stay around too long."

He watched the buckboard until its dust cloud was well beyond the outskirts. A small smile appeared around his mouth. *It was an ill wind that blew me off my feet that time. Laura did not sweeten with age.* He angled across the street just as a half a dozen riders came into Sage City and pulled their mounts in front of the sheriff's office. Horses and men were soaked with sweat and coated with dust. Murtaugh guessed they had been chasing wilder game than cattle. He strolled over to see if any of the faces were familiar and to hear what the men were saying.

The sheriff came out to the sagging boards of the porch and it seemed to pain him to walk. Charlie Byle was still in office, Murtaugh discovered. Byle had suffered from rheumatism a long time and it had edged his temper.

"No luck as always," he snapped. "If these joints of mine would get some oil back in 'em I'd git this job done myself."

"Hold your horses, Charlie," a rider snapped. "We got somethin' to go on anyway. The Rafter K night guard got shot up a heap, but he ain't goin' to die. That spook he claimed he winged—we found him as dead as a doornail about three miles from where the herd was stampeded. A slat of a man with a cold eye, an' wearin' a brown an' white calfskin vest. Two big gold teeth in the front of his mouth."

Byle said, "I saw him in town not more'n ten days ago. There was a jigger with him that had outlaw written all over him. Wore a short black beard, black shirt an' levis, an' half-boots. You're right, we've got somethin' to work on."

A RIDER suddenly snapped the stub of a cigarette from his fingers. "An' we'd better hurry, sheriff. My boss has already lost a thousand head."

Just then Clay Murtaugh strode up and said, "I heard the description of a man, Byle. I've done a lot of ridin' the past few years and I've read a lot of reward dodgers. I'd say the man with the beard was a curly wolf named Hack Banta."

Byle pushed his hat back over his thinning hair and stepped past a jaded rider to the edge of the porch. "An' you look kind of familiar, friend," he said coldly.

"I'm Clay Murtaugh."

Byle stiffened. "I'll be damned!"

Since there was no trace of displeasure on his face, it occurred to Murtaugh that his father had left him a lot more than he'd realized. Not one dollar or a single head of stock or a square foot of ground, but something of greater value, a belief that he and everyone else had judged Clay Murtaugh wrong.

Byle waved the riders off and called Murtaugh into his office. When he'd seated himself in a beat-up armchair, he said:

"Clay, you've changed. You look a little spooky an' you wear a gun like you had the no-how."

"The going hasn't been easy, sheriff," Murtaugh said. "I haven't been exactly inside the pale."

"Why did you come back?"

"Kel Sloat asked me that," the puncher grinned. "I guess I got homesick an' anxious to see how certain people prospered. Like Kirkland, for instance."

"He's doing all right with the Paddle," Byle said.

"I never took that five thousand dollars, sheriff," Murtaugh said stiffly. "Whatever became of it? Ever hear what became of Ferd Mostil?"

"He left these parts about a year after you did, Clay. Who can keep track of cowpunchers? They come an' they go."

"That's so," Murtaugh said. "I wonder if Beidler can use a hand."

"Try him," the sheriff said. "I think he'd hire a salty puncher. They got two hundred head from him not long ago."

"Yeah. It won't hurt to stay on for a few weeks," Murtaugh said, and got up. "What do you believe now, Byle?"

"Your pa's opinion of anythin' always sounded pretty good to me, Clay."

"Thanks," Murtaugh said and left.

He rode into the 3 Bar ranch yard just after dusk and nodded to four punchers grouped near the corral. "Beidler around?"

"Up at the house," a little stocky man in bullhide chaps said, his eyes quickly appraising.

As Murtaugh sniffed at the air, another puncher said, "I'll see the sheffie about warmin' up a plate of grub, friend."

"I could use it," Murtaugh said.

He rode up to the house in which he'd been born. Nostalgia now had its way with him and all the old memories piled up and put a lump in his throat. A slow anger burned in him when he knocked on the door.

Beidler's gruff voice bade Murtaugh come in. He stepped inside and his eyes wandered over familiar objects before he looked at the rancher. The old sampler on the wall over the fireplace, the old rocker his mother always had for her own. The door leading to the little room where the iron safe had been . . .

"Well?" Beidler asked impatiently. He was a big and rugged man in his late fifties and Murtaugh instinctively liked him.

"I'm Clay Murtaugh," the puncher said.

BEIDLER threw a newspaper aside. "George Murtaugh's boy? He always figured you might come back an' he asked me to give you a hand if you needed it. Maybe you need me, Clay. I could use you."

"Let's have somethin' understood," Murtaugh said after shaking hands with Beidler. "I want a loose rein here. I want no hobbles put on me. I want to be free to come an' go as I choose. I have my reasons."

"I can guess," Beidler said. "All right, you're on the payroll, Clay, an' on those terms. Better git down to the bunkhouse an' warm up your stomach."

"I'll earn my pay," Murtaugh said. He turned his head quickly when he heard the sound of iron rims grinding the gravel out in the yard.

"My wife and daughter," Beidler said. "They've been over to a nester's place. Helpin' out a sick woman."

Murtaugh went out and saw a tall puncher helping the womenfolk out of the buckboard. He slowed his gait when he caught the glance of the tall, slim girl wearing the man's shirt and faded dungarees. He thought of the ill wind again and knew now that it had been part of a pattern, and for the first time in years he gave thought to the future. Old-timers had told him that he'd only think he was in love the first time, and to be careful.

He nodded politely to the distaff side of the 3 Bar and led his bronc down to the corral where he stripped it and turned it loose. He had a feeling now that he'd come home, that all this had been destined to happen. No doubt the Beidler girl had heard about Clay Murtaugh and the sorry details connected with him, so there was much to be done and no place to begin.

Murtaugh rode with Beidler's punchers all that day and the next. The cowpokes openly admired his savvy when it came to roping, and handling a top quarter horse. Heading back to the ranch one night, he crossed the stage road and saw that a reward dodger had been nailed up. Five hundred dollars for Hack Banta, whether dead or alive.

Since the urge to look in on Kirkland was strong within him, Murtaugh followed the beaten path for about a mile until he came to a narrower road that strung away from it and led toward Whispering Creek. It was dark when he rode into the Paddle ranch yard and up to the bunkhouse. Three punchers suddenly appeared in the doorway, and Murtaugh was about to ask for the boss when he recognized Steve Kirkland.

"Kind of expected you, Clay," Kirkland said. "Laura told me you come back."

"Nice place you've got, Steve," Murtaugh said. "I'm ridin' for Beidler. Matter of sentiment, I figure. The old homestead you might say. Saw that dodgers are up for that outlaw, Banta, an' I ain't above doin' some bounty huntin'. Guess that's one reason I didn't just keep ridin' south."

Kirkland said, "Let's go up to the house, Clay. Laura ought to be able to rustle some late grub for you. Guess the news of your father's death hit you kind of hard."

"Yeah," Murtaugh said, and slipped out of the saddle.

Steve Kirkland still had his raffish good looks, but he seemed jumpy somehow. Well, he'd taken Laura for better or for worse.

THE woman did not exactly throw her arms around Clay Murtaugh when he walked into the house with Kirkland. "Take a seat, Clay," she said. "I have a little work to finish for Steve."

She went over to a little table in the corner and started hitting the big white keys of a typewriter. Murtaugh looked quizzically at Kirkland and the man grinned expansively.

"Yeah, we go along with the times, Clay," Kirkland said. "Ever see one of them writin' machines before? Laura's gettin' so she can work it mighty fast."

"Saw one in a newspaper office somewhere," Clay said.

He walked over to get a better look at the contraption. He studied the first sentence of the letter Laura had written. The *t's* were out of line. Laura was writing to a mail-order house.

Murtaugh said: "It looks like the country's goin' machine loco. A drummer up in Butte tol' me he saw a wagon that run without a horse back in Chicago."

"Out here we could stand some civilization," Laura said nervously. All at once Murtaugh felt a chill and wondered why. The fireplace was roaring and and the stove out there in the kitchen had a kettle steaming.

He had a bite with the Kirklands and was anxious to get away. Old wounds were acting up. An eight-year barrier had become strong. "Nice to see you both well-fixed," he said,

and shoved his chair back. "I'd better get on back to the 3 Bar."

Kirkland nodded. "Come again, Clay. I've got no cause to be jealous. You an' Laura sure don't act like you'd been sweethearts one time."

"Why did you have to say that?" the woman asked angrily, and Murtaugh quickly picked up his hat and walked to the door. "Much obliged to both of you," he said, and was glad to get out of there.

Several minutes later when he was swapping idle talk with Paddle punchers, he heard Steve Kirkland coming down from the house. Kirkland called out, "Clay, just a minute."

He followed Steve over toward a big hayrick, leading his horse.

Kirkland said, "You had only one reason to come back, Clay. I know you've ridden with a wild bunch because the marks are on you. Beidler practically stole that ranch that really belongs to you. If you need any help—"

Murtaugh looked at Kirkland for a long moment. "I don't quite savvy, Steve. But I want no help from anybody. Did I get it that time my father's place was robbed? Do you mean you'd back me on a crooked deal?"

Kirkland shook his head. "Clay, I didn't say that. We've got trouble enough here without you workin' to pay off a grudge."

"An' I didn't say *that*," Murtaugh grinned, and got into the saddle. "I'll maybe see you around."

Five miles away from the Paddle, Murtaugh stopped to consider. He knew that Steve had been trying to feel him out and that Kirkland had not been at all concerned about another running-iron artist moving in. Steve's riders, what he had seen of them could not be considered milk and peace-loving rannyhans. *You remind me of a book I read one time, Steve. The cover was mighty pleasing to the eye, but the stuff inside curled a man's hair.*

As Murtaugh's trail led him toward the distant valley wall, he remembered the wildness of the land at its extreme end. Ten thousand cattle could be hidden there, and men could be shot and their bones picked white before they could ever be found. Murtaugh rode through heavy timber and out onto a great flat bench where cattle grazed. When he came to the drop-off, he could see the mists boiling up from the salt meadows below and ahead. The moon was gibbous; it was a rustler's moon, and he wondered how many bunks would be cold tonight.

MURTAUGH was in broken country an hour later and hunkered down on the edge of a low-hanging bluff. The silence was so profound it buzzed in his ears. He was on the outer fringes of the range now. Five miles beyond the mouth of the valley the desert began. Murtaugh heard and smelled cattle all around him. He realized that a man so inclined could easily get himself a start here with a wide loop and a running iron.

Suddenly he came up off his haunches, for he heard the gunfire far off to the left. It was a group of small pounding sounds that barely reached Murtaugh. He threw a cigarette away and sharpened all his senses. There were more shots and a low rumble as if a thunderstorm was building up.

Trouble. Murtaugh ran to his bronc and got in the saddle. There was no mistaking the earth-jar or running cattle. His bronc raced along the edge of the butte and found a steep trail down to the edge of a canyon wall. The cow pony followed the trail's windings to a hump-backed ridge where piñon and juniper grew thick. Murtaugh rode up and over, then dropped down a series of low benches. Suddenly he yanked the horse's head up when he saw the shape of a horse and rider loom up suddenly at the mouth of a ravine. Murtaugh smelled the smoke of a fire just as he called out:

"I'm Murtaugh from 3 Bar. What's your brand?"

"Tuck Moger of Rafter K," a voice said, and the rider swung toward him and came in close. "You hear the shots?"

The low rumbling was unmistakable now.

Murtaugh said, "It's a night for spooks. Come on, we might sting 'em some!"

"Rafter K an' Muleshoe stock!" the puncher threw at Murtaugh as they rode at a hard clip.

Slimy mud slowed them up as they crossed an almost waterless stream. The Rafter K man swore his impatience. "Dobe Lenny an' Slim Poole were guardin' the herd. No more firin'—don't like the feel of things."

They came down a brush-covered slope and onto the flats where cattle were scattered. The quick beat of their broncs' hoofs spooked them again. A horse came toward them, its rider rocking in the saddle. The man fell to the ground just as Murtaugh caught hold of a bridle rein. The Rafter K puncher quickly cleared his saddle and knelt beside the mumbling night guard.

"Slim, what happened?"

"No chance, Tuck. Dobe—dead. I—saw who they—was. They just rode up—to—us—an'—" The puncher's head rolled and fell forward and stayed there.

Murtaugh shook him by the shoulders, let his breath sough out, and looked up at the Rafter K man. "No use," he said.

They found Dobe Lenny at the feet of his bronc, a hole in his chest, dead-center.

"They knew 'em as friendly riders, Tuck," Murtaugh said. "The skunks just rode up to 'em an' smiled an' then drew and shot 'em down. Then the spooks rode down an' cut out a chunk of beef. Figure they're headed for the badlands the other side of mogul Ridge. Stay with these rannies until I round up the Rafter K bunch. Somethin' tells me there'll be a hundred men combin' this valley an' beyond for the next couple of days."

"I'll wait," Murtaugh said, and reached for the makings.

A half hour after Tuck had ridden away there were nearly a dozen horsemen with Murtaugh. They'd arrived in small groups: three Muleshoe punchers, five from the Box J, and the rest forking broncs carrying Kirkland's Paddle brand. Murtaugh remembered the faces of two of them.

A Muleshoe puncher said, "So you're named Murtaugh. Ridin' alone an' far off Beidler's range." The inference was plain.

Murtaugh stood silently by a dead man. He didn't trust himself to speak for a moment. Nerves were strung tight here and a word could touch off violence.

Finally he said quietly, "A man can still ride where he pleases, friend. Do I look that whack-eared I'd sit up with the dead if I'd had a hand in their killin'?"

"We'll back you up, Murtaugh," a Paddle rider said stiffly, and the tension tapered off.

AN HOUR later Murtaugh rode with twenty punchers toward the Mogul Ridge. A man was well on his way to Sage City to get Byle and as many able-bodied men available who were capable of staying on a horse and handling firearms. By sunrise the valley was swarming with armed riders. They prowled in small bunches, looking into every possible freak of nature that would afford a hiding place for men of Hack Banta's breed and the cattle they had stolen.

Toward midafternoon of the next day Murtaugh and Tuck Moger strayed from their group and found themselves just on the other side of Mogul, in a wild and gutted region that tumbled toward the desert's rim. They dismounted and drank from a thin stream of water trickling out of a rocky wall, let some of the sweat dry out of them, and gave their broncs the rest they sorely needed.

"They must have a hole in the ground with brush thrown over it," Tuck growled. "It swallows the cattle right up an' they slide down a chute, maybe."

Murtaugh grabbed Tuck's arm. "Keep down—I hear broncs."

"They've got to pass right over us," the Rafter K puncher said brittlely, and drew his gun. "Only this one path, Murtaugh."

"Yeah," Beidler's rider said, and waited.

Three horsemen came around a rocky shoulder just below, and Murtaugh had his Winch out of the saddle boot. Abruptly he warned Tuck. "Paddle riders. Kirkland with 'em."

He straightened and raised his right hand. The Paddle trio stopped their horses dead still. Kirkland bent his head and peered cautiously ahead.

"It's Clay Murtaugh, Steve. Any luck?"

Kirkland shook his head, got out of the saddle. Fatigue pulled the corners of his mouth down and his eyes were too bright. Clay Murtaugh looked at the Paddle broncs, their riders, and felt the tension get hold of him again.

"Chasin' ghosts," Kirkland said. "I figure to take one last look around an' then I'm headin' back to the home ranch. Byle is gettin' paid for this business. I've got stock to think about."

The Paddle riders moved on up the narrow trail and disappeared beyond the crest of a knifelike ridge.

"Figure he talked sense," Moger growled, and ground out a smoking butt with a bootheel. "We'd better git back to strength of numbers, Murtaugh, before we're picked off like grouse."

Nearly a half hour later Murtaugh said, "Let's take the same way as the Paddle riders."

"What's stirrin' in your mind, Murtaugh?"

"A hunch," Murtaugh said. "A wild one."

In the saddle and riding, an hour later, they came to a canyon wall where the floor of the wide breach that took a southwesterly course was heavily wooded in many places.

Tuck Moger said, "I don't remember ever ridin' through this part of the country."

"I knew I did once," Murtaugh said. "It's just vaguely familiar, Tuck. Went huntin' with my father when I wa'n't more than fourteen. Quiet as the grave here."

"Too quiet," Moger said huskily. "I—"

The Rafter K puncher's mouth stayed open while the sudden pounding of six-guns lasted. Murtaugh sat as stiff as a ramrod in the saddle as he held his startled mount in check. The gunfire stopped. Murtaugh saw a man come up out of the junipers on the far side of the canyon and start toward the rim. A rifle cracked, then the man threw up his arms and tumbled over backward.

"Come on," Murtaugh yelled to Moger, and spurred his bronc. "They've flushed game!"

IT WAS about fifteen minutes later when they found the flumelike cut in the rear of the canyon. Their broncs picked their way carefully. Murtaugh heard voices and the whicker of horses when he reached the canyon floor. He was hardly off his bronc and heading for a wall of jackpine when a man jumped toward him, a gun in his hand. It was a Paddle rider, and he looked wild.

"You found 'em?" Murtaugh said, the short hairs on his neck crawling.

"Yeah. Caught 'em cold, friend," the puncher said, and turned and went back into the pines.

Murtaugh and Moger followed. When they came out into a small clearing, they saw Steve Kirkland standing in front of a long low hut, a rifle cradled in his right arm. There was a dead man at Kirkland's feet. Five broncs stamped in a corral near the cabin. Powdersmoke was heavy in the air of deepening dusk.

Kirkland grinned bleakly when Clay Murtaugh walked toward him. "Take a look inside, Murtaugh," he said. "We jumped 'em fast. Left our horses up in the timber a quarter of a mile from here. We spotted their woodsmoke."

Murtaugh said, "How many?" and stepped past Kirkland and into the cabin.

Three men were sprawled out on the floor, one apart from the rest. He lay prone and Murtaugh could see he wore a beard. Murtaugh stood there for several minutes absorbing the entire picture. Seeing two rifles stood against the woodbox near the stove, Murtaugh went over and examined them. They hadn't been fired.

There was a bullet hole in the outlaw's back. His gun was partly out of its holster. The spook over by the bunks was on his back, and he hadn't drawn his gun. A chill came through the door and iced the sweat that was on Murtaugh. He knelt down and turned the bearded man over on his back and went through his clothes. He couldn't find anything. Then he saw Banta's hat under the table and reaching for it, ran his finger under the sweatband. He came up with a sweat-soaked folded piece of paper just as Kirkland stepped inside. Murtaugh quickly shoved it inside his shirt.

"Banta, ain't it?" Kirkland asked.

"Looks like," Murtaugh said, and walked out of the cabin. Moger was talking with the Paddle riders.

"Figure we'll find a brush corral not very far away," Kirkland said. "Byle will sure gripe over that reward money, Clay."

Murtaugh drew his six-gun and fired into the air three times. Then he sat down on a windfall and built himself a smoke. *Too pat. Banta wasn't that careless!*

"They were dead on their feet," Kirkland said. "Wool in their heads. We were lucky."

Seeing a group of riders on the canyon rim, Kirkland fired his rifle. Moger threw three shots from his Colt and told a Paddle man to go in and stir up a fire. "The smoke'll lead 'em in," he said.

Murtaugh turned his back on Kirkland and reached inside his shirt. He opened up the sodden piece of paper and read the words that were strung unevenly across it. Each one hit him with the force of a heavy fist:

Blast you, Ferd. Stay out of Sage City.

Written by a typing machine. The *t's* were out of line. Murtaugh's hands shook as he thrust the paper back inside his shirt. He set his teeth hard while he regained his composure. The past came back to nag him, and pieces of a jigsaw puzzle slid into place in his mind. Ferd Mostil! He'd turned into Hack Banta.

Murtaugh got up slowly. Smoke was pouring out of the hut's chimney when he walked toward it. He heard the shouts from the riders coming down into the canyon. The Paddle rider came away from the stove when Murtaugh knelt beside the dead outlaw. He stopped in his tracks when the puncher said, "I think this coyote is still breathin'."

Kirkland's rider hurried out, calling to his boss.

Murtaugh waited until Steve came in, then looked up at Kirkland and said, "If we can get him to talk some before—get some water, Steve."

KIRKLAND stood where he was, the oil shine of sweat coming out on his face. Suddenly he dropped on one knee and roughly turned the outlaw over on his side.

"That won't help keepin' him alive, Steve," Murtaugh snapped.

"You're crazy, Clay. He's as dead as a doornail," Kirkland said with a half-laugh and sleeved his face. Out there the clearing became alive with possemen. "We've got some gravediggin' to do before it gets too dark."

Dig yours, too, Steve. As Steve Kirkland walked away, Murtaugh

said aloud, "I always wondered what become of Ferd Mostil."

Kirkland stopped, slowly turned around. "What—what did you say, Clay?"

Just then five men came walking toward the hut. Murtaugh said, "Don't act so surprised, Steve. You knew it all the time."

The sheriff and four deputies filled the doorway. Byle looked in and swore under his breath, "Who caught up with 'em?" he asked, and suddenly recognized Clay Murtaugh.

"Kirkland and a couple of his jiggers, Charlie," Murtaugh said. "He could have had 'em any time he wanted when their back was turned. That outlaw used to be Ferd Mostil, the skunk that fixed me the night my father was robbed. Him and Kirkland—"

"Now wait!" Kirkland yelled hoarsely. "You wait, Murtaugh! You're guessin' wild. You got no proof an' you know it."

"Got it in my pocket, Steve!" Murtaugh said. "A message to Ferd. banged out on your typin' machine. That was mighty careless, or was it Ferd who was slipshod not tearin' it up? You an' Ferd Mostil, Steve. A pair. You robbed my father that night while Ferd kept me over in that line cabin.

"Look at the dead spooks, Byle. They never had a chance. Not one of their six-guns fired. They let their friends come in and then got murdered. Like the Paddle punchers with Kirkland here—they rode up to the Rafter K nighthawks an' smiled a greetin' perhaps—and then shot 'em."

There was a sound of swiftly moving boots. Then two gunshots. A voice roared, "You make one more move, you coyotes, an' I'll shoot higher." Murtaugh recognized Tuck Moger's voice, and he laughed at the terrible grayness coming over Kirkland's face.

"Your punchers, Steve? I figure they'll talk plenty even before a trial," Murtaugh said. "Where's the last bunch of rustled stock, you skunk?"

Anticipating Kirkland's move before his words flew off his tongue, he drew and fired before Steve had his gun dragged clear. Murtaugh relished the sound of the bullet striking and driving Kirkland back against the wall. All of the bitterness in him drained out as fast as did Kirkland's blood as the Paddle owner sagged to the floor. Murtaugh would tell Kel Sloat, the saddler, that spilt milk could be picked up. He turned toward Charlie Byle, a small inquiry in his eyes.

The sheriff said, "Nice shootin', Clay. You give him more than a fair shake."

Steve Kirkland spent almost an hour dying. He did all the talking that Murtaugh and Sheriff Byle needed. Not long after he'd widowed Laura, the posse made their way along the canyon floor to a corral holding nearly six hundred head of rustled stock.

"Yeah," Murtaugh said, feeling the strain of the past few hours, "Steve wasn't ever a savin' man. But he had quite a start buildin' up the Paddle."

"Your pa's happy tonight," Byle said, and laid a big hand on Clay's shoulder.

Murtaugh slept at the Rafter K for the rest of the night. On his way back to the 3 Bar he decided that it was his duty to tell Laura, so he rode to the Paddle and found two of Byle's deputies in possession. He knocked on the door of the ranch house and Laura came out. He saw no grief in her eyes, only deep regret. She said in a dull voice, "I know, Clay. It had to come." She stared at him hungrily and her eyes began to fill. "If I could only go back, Clay. If—"

He walked away just as she started crying, and did not look back. She was a part of the past that was dead and gone, and what he wanted to forget completely. A man or woman makes his or her own bed and so has to sleep in it.

He rode into the 3 Bar at suppertime and Beidler was at the gate. "The news traveled fast, Clay," he said. "Let one of the punchers take care of the bronc. Beth an' her ma have a spread fit for a king. Got your room already, too."

Murtaugh leaned over the saddle horn and stared at Beidler.

"Your home, wa'n't it, Clay?" the rancher grinned. "Figure we can cook up some kind of a deal. The law is goin' to figure the Paddle is your'n, don't forget that. Hitched onto the 3 Bar, there'd be enough room for two bosses."

Clay Murtaugh went up to the house with Beidler, and the girl met them at the door. Her smile, he knew for sure, was not for her father alone. As he stepped into the room he knew so well, he had the deep feeling that his children would be born here and that one of them, a girl, would have eyes and hair just like Beth Beidler's.

"Sit down, son," Mrs. Beidler said.

His chair was next to Beth's. He heard a sudden gust of wind shoulder along the side of a house. And as he poked at a big chunk of steak with a fork, it occurred to him that it was the ill wind chasing after somebody else, now it had finished blowing him in the right direction.

Vultures Prey on Easy Pickin's

By Joseph Commings

(Continued from page 45)

It was the only time he ever had lost—and he'd even planned that. This time, to win meant to lose, and to lose meant to win. Ironic.

He slipped the coin into his waistcoat pocket. "I hear they're doing great things down in the Panhandle. That's where I'm heading."

"Oh," said Lou sorrowfully, "I'll hate to see you go, Horatio."

Hackney gulped with surprise. "You're—not coming with me?"

Lou was wrapped around one of Firestriker's long arms. "Oh, no! I'm going to stay and become Mrs. Law and Order."

Firestriker looked down at her. "And I'll always do my best to keep you from meeting the kind of people who have to go to jail."

"Yes, dear," she said. "Shield me from them."

Hackney raised his hands in benediction. "My fondest blessings on you both."

At dawn Hackney was riding out of town on the mail coach again. He was still the single passenger.

The driver leaned out to say down to him, "Leavin' already? You didn't stay long in Easy Pickin's."

Hackney was disgusted. "They ought to change the name to Slim Pickin's."

"Yeah? Didn't make out as good as you thought you would, hey?"

Hackney tried to settle back comfortably among the mailbags. "Crime does not pay," he said, and then he added silently, "enough!"

Kid Lawhawk

Link Layden had signed up for that deputy's job expecting plenty of excitement. But when his big moment finally came, Link didn't even have a .45 to brace two gun-laden hardcases.

By Frank P. Castle

LINK LAYDEN finished sorting and stacking the last of the *Wanted* posters which had come in this day's mail and stood up, tired and sullen from the tedious job. He hooked thumbs into the waistband

of the new, tight whipcord saddle breeches he had bought in imitation of those worn by Sheriff Pat Wickman, and looked at the shell belts and holstered guns hung over pegs in the big front room of the Escondido jail. One of the pegs had his name on it, but he wasn't allowed to take down the belt and snap it on.

Link had thought, when he bought the expensive breeches, that being hired as one of Pat's deputies meant he was already a full-fledged lawman. Evidently the sheriff did not share this opinion. Layden's lip jutted mutinously as he went into the cubby occupied by old Bert Bailey, the jailer.

"Suppertime," Link growled. "Give me Mervyn's key, and I'll waltz him up the street for his meal. Hell, I'd rather pay from my own pocket to have a waiter bring his tray down here! I signed up for some action and excitement, but with all Pat lets me do I'd been better off just to wait counter at the Ace High and be done with it."

"Somebody's got to handle the chore, boy," Bailey said mildly. "Mervyn's only a material witness, held here for his own safety—not a prisoner. We can't feed him jail grub."

"Sure—but why does Pat pick on me?" Link demanded angrily. "Three weeks on this job, and all he lets me do is haul that little weasel to the Ace High for his meals. Anybody in town—even a kid off the street—could spell me in that job. I'm supposed to be a deputy, but I haven't got a badge yet to prove it, and he won't even let me carry a gun. The whole town's talking about it—laughing, too, behind my back."

"That so?" the jailer said. "Ain't heard such talk, myself. Son, when you've been around as long as I have, you'll learn Pat Wickman has a good reason for everything he does. I'd string with him if I was you—"

Layden snorted, taking a key from the old man's desk. He went into the cell block, inserted it in the lock of the first gate, and pulled it open.

"Come on out, Mervyn," he said. "Time to eat again."

Lew Mervyn obeyed, nervously shooting his cuffs. He was a little man, dandified, with a pallor not entirely due to his stay in the jail. Deep fear had paled him, too.

As he came out, he looked, as always, to a cell farther along the corridor, where a massive shadow was outlined against the bars. Hamp Rodger was standing there. He always stood up to look at his betrayer when Mervyn came and went. A grimly silent man, Rodger. He had voiced no threats against Mervyn since the little man had been lodged near him. He didn't need to. The fact that he was there was enough for Mervyn, who had done town errands for Rodger and who had then revealed where and how he could be caught.

WATCHING, as he stepped aside for Mervyn to go ahead, Link Layden felt the cold tension that nearness of Rodger brought. The man had a long, bloody trail of lawlessness stretching out behind him. The whole West had been his hunting ground. Some luck, a lot of hard work, and canny knowledge on Pat Wickman's part of what would make Lew Mervyn talk had landed Rodger in a New Mexico jail. And when Mervyn told what he knew, in court, Rodger was going to hang.

Moving toward the Ace High Restaurant, Link kept one step behind Mervyn and looked all ways at once, as he had been instructed. Not that there was anything to see. Escondido was a lively, growing town, but this was supper hour and the main street was quiet. And if something did happen, he thought, there wouldn't be much he could do, since Wickman wouldn't let him carry a gun.

It was a hell of a situation. He was a full-fledged deputy, but all Pat let him do was shuffle paper in the office and play nursemaid to Lew Mervyn. The other three deputies had

been away from the office for a week—doing something, Link had guessed, in the blind canyons and cave-pocked buttes to the north. Escondido had taken its name from that country of many hiding places. It chafed Link that he couldn't have a part in whatever they were doing.

It had been a big thing to take a job with the Escondido sheriff, at double the highest riding pay he had ever made. A fortunate thing for a big young fellow of twenty-one that Pat Wickman had been his father's friend, and had made a place for Link on his payroll. But what he had been told to do wasn't his idea of man's work. He wanted a badge and a gun and saddlework in the open with the others.

They swung into the street and angled across to the restaurant. The town seemed even quieter than usual at this hour, as though something had taken everyone off the street. A piano tinkled brassily in the Pioneer Bar, and Link looked longingly over its batwings. One of Pat's sternest orders had been to keep Mervyn out of saloons. This had resulted in keeping Link out of them, too, since he had been tied to the jail office with Pat and the others away.

He was no deputy sheriff, Link thought bitterly. He had just been hired to handle tiresome, routine chores nobody else wanted to do.

Link opened the restaurant doors and looked inside. It was almost empty, which was another unusual thing this evening. A couple of sheepmen were chewing stolidly at the counter, hats jammed down on their heads and serapes over their shoulders. The Ace High's new waitress stood a little beyond them, looking in boredom at her shining, tapered nails. A starched white dress was taut against her magnificently proportioned body. A mass of brick-red hair seemed to catch fire from a lamp over her head. She looked at Link, and a faintly mocking smile touched her lips.

"Ah!" she murmured. "The nursemaid!"

"Tessie, don't say that," Link protested half-heartedly. He had come to agree with the girl's constant talk that he wasn't a deputy at all—just a flunky for Pa Wickman. It was she who had told him the whole town was talking about it. His discontent increased as he pointed to an empty booth. Mervyn scuttled into it, hunching down in a chair with his hands trembling against the table.

TESSIE HARRIS came around the end of the counter and offered a handwritten menu, her smile widening as she did so, and moving close enough for Link to detect the exciting scent she used.

"Maybe you're not, then," she said. "I don't want to think you are, Link—because I like you. You're about the nicest man I've met in this town since I've been here, and I think I've met them all. But I judge by what I see. You say you're a deputy sheriff, but I don't see a star on your shirt. I don't see any gun at your side. I've known deputies before, but I never knew one like you. All that you do is bring that scared little rabbit in here for his meals. I think a man who does that for a living is a nursemaid, no matter what he says."

"I'll show you different," Link growled. "You wait, Tessie!"

"Sure," she agreed, leaning even closer to him. "But not too long, Link. A girl just doesn't do that. She wants to know about a man in a hurry."

He nodded, giving his usual order of two steaks, rare, without even looking at the menu. It was always this way. Whenever he was around this girl, he could not pry his eyes away from her. What she had said, plus the caressing tone of her voice, made his heart pump faster. She had always seemed attracted to him from her first day here, which had been just after he had started to work for Pat Wickman.

A deputy in Escondido was well

paid, with a chance to earn more in fees at tax-collecting time. A man could build a future fast in his mind when a pretty red-haired girl talked to him as Tessie had; he could even remember that Pat was getting old and a smart young fellow could set his sights on Pat's job. But not while his work included only looking after Lew Mervyn and sorting *Wanted* posters. Link decided he was going to have to make it plain to Pat that he required a job with a lot more responsibility.

Lew Mervyn leaned toward him as he sat down.

"Those men at the counter, Layden—" he whispered fearfully. "They've got a familiar look. I think the big one is Ute Cross. They're here to kill me!"

Link grunted in exasperation. "Every time we come in here," he growled, "you recognize somebody Hamp has sent for—somebody who's going to kill you."

"Why not?" Mervyn protested. "It's because I know Hamp so well. He's the devil himself. He knows this Territory won't have a hanging case against him unless I talk on the witness stand when he comes to trial. He's killed plenty, but I'm the only eyewitness to one of his murders. Damn it, I don't like coming here! I'd rather stay in my cell. I've told that hammered-down sheriff so, but he won't pay attention. He puts me at the mercy of a careless kid, and he won't listen when I tell him Hamp has surely passed word for me to be killed."

"Here's our steaks," Link said. "Shut up and eat fast, so I can lock you in again. And stop rolling your eyes at the counter. Those are just a couple of Mex sheepherders."

Tessie smiled at him again, placing the sizzling platters. She looked at Lew Mervyn and her lip curled. Nobody in town had much use for the little man, but she seemed to have conceived a special dislike for him.

"Just the same," Mervyn mumbled, "that big one looks an awful lot like Ute. I only saw him once, at night, but I remember he had a crooked nose—"

Link snorted, chewing hungrily. At the same time, however, he eyed the two at the counter sharply. For a moment he almost wished the big one might be Ute Cross, whose reputation was second only to that of his boss, Hamp Rodger. Pat Wickman had been deeply disappointed at not nabbing Ute, too, when he had taken Rodger.

It would set Link pretty high to slide out now, get a gun, and have Ute behind bars the next time Pat showed up. But these were only sheepmen, in from their lonely wagon out on the range to wolf a town meal. They even had the rank sheep smell, which made Tessie stand ostentatiously as far from them as she could get.

IT SEEMED to Link the girl was tensed up about something. Maybe it was the lack of trade this evening; maybe she thought business was suddenly turning bad and she was in danger of losing her job.

Link saw her frown and bite her lip—then she became aware of his gaze and tilted her head toward him, with another quick, warm smile. It made Link tingle all over again. He was a man and drawing a man's pay, even if he wasn't doing a man's work. He intended for some hard talk with Pat Wickman to fix that up. Then he'd talk to Tessie. A girl as pretty as she was deserved something better than working in a place where she had to come in contact with people like these smelly sheepmen.

Those two at the counter finished eating and lighter stubby black Mexican *cigarros*. They seemed in no hurry to leave. Tessie turned down the counter lamps. She went into the kitchen and Link heard her say good night to the cook. She came out again, coat over her arm.

Link looked sourly at Lew Mervyn. Now he'd have to take the little man

back, lock him up for the night, and then check Hamp Rodger's cell. After that, he'd have time on his hands and nothing to do, except obey an order that he stay at the jail unless he was relieved by Pat or another deputy. He had done a lot of that—too much of it for his taste.

"Link," Tessie Harris murmured, "would you hold my coat for me?"

He got up hurriedly, grinning with pleasure. The girl smiled at him over her shoulder.

"It's no fun walking home alone," she went on. "And I've heard there's a dance at the lodge hall tonight. Maybe I've turned down invitations from other men, hoping I'd hear one that I'd like to accept."

Link looked at the provocative curve of her mouth and was tempted.

"I can't, Tessie," he grumbled. "I've got to see Mervyn back to his cell."

The girl wrinkled her nose disdainfully.

"The jail is just across the street and down a few doors," she said. "Not more than a hundred yards, I'll bet. Tell the scared little fool to go back and lock himself in. You said you were going to show me something, Link. This is the time to do it. I want to go to that dance, and I want to go with you."

She had a hand on his arm and was pulling him toward the door. Mervyn, nervously playing with a cigarette and trying to get a clear look at the big man on the counter stool, had paid no attention to the conversation between Link and the girl. Link knew he would scuttle back to his cell fast enough. It certainly wasn't far, along an open street where it wasn't full dark yet. Mervyn could get there as quickly by himself as he could with Link Layden walking one step behind him.

The girl reached out and swung the front door open. Link hadn't said he'd go with her, but the soft murmur of her voice seemed to pull him on. He couldn't see how Pat could possibly object, because three weeks of this had shown that Mervyn's fears of being killed were foolish. And it could be a helpful move, since it would show Pat that his badgeless deputy had a mind and spirit of his own.

He put his foot over the threshold, automatically noting the sheepmen's three horses at the hitchrail. He paused there, still undecided, and the girl pulled impatiently at his hand.

"Come on," she said sharply. "The dance starts at eight."

"Just a minute," Link said, frowning. He swung around, and the big man at the counter lifted his serape with one hand and uncovered the muzzle of a Colt .44. It was lined at Link's middle.

"Don't, Ute!" the girl cried out. "Remember our agreement—"

"Sure," the man growled. "I remember I agreed you could try your way. But I saw him look at those horses, and I know he's wondering how come there's three of them and only two of us. He can't go out on the street with that still nagging him."

"I set this up!" Tessie said furiously. "Hamp told you to take orders from me!"

"Shut up, girl. I'm tired of this cat-and-mousing. I'm going to get Hamp out, pronto, my own way." The big man's slitted gaze swung to Link. "Boy, come back in here. I'm Ute Cross. That third horse is Hamp Rodger's pet saddle mount. We're going over to the jail, you and me, and let Hamp out. Then a loose-tongued rat is going to get shut up for good. Tessie figured to toll you out of the way. She's got a weakness for brash young fools, and didn't want you hurt. Me, I've got no use for lawmen, even a kind that don't wear a badge. You do as you're told, and keep quiet."

MERVYN had stumbled to his feet, whimpering in fright. The second man slid from his stool, took two swift steps and slapped him with the

back of his hand. Mervyn went to his knees and stayed there. Ute Cross looked at him, lip curling.

"Always did say the best way is just to ram in and do a thing," he growled. "Maybe Hamp will agree with me now. Maybe he'll listen to me after this, and stop letting the latest girl he's interested in make his plans for him."

Link felt numb. Thoughts were flashing through his head too rapidly for him to grab one which would tell him what to do. He tasted gall as he looked at the girl and saw the hard, scornful set of her mouth. She was Hamp Rodger's woman. She had played him for a damned fool—had almost persuaded him to walk out and leave to be murdered the Territory's only witness against Rodger.

One thing hammered with clarity in his head. Whatever had gone before, he was the law here in Escondido—with Pat and his other deputies away, the only one who could do anything about this bold try to murder Lew Mervyn and release Hamp Rodger. He'd probably get himself killed if he made a move, but he didn't much care about that. He felt too humiliated to care much about anything.

Ute Cross slid off his stool.

"Boy, we'll go spring Hamp now," he said.

His gun had swung a trifle as he moved, so that it no longer was full on Link. And he was off-balance for a moment as he swung down from the counter. Link hit him.

He went in low, lifting his shoulder in a powerful lunge. He was taller than Cross, and his shoulder point, coming up with all the force of his wiry body under it, smashed Ute's nose from beneath. Link grabbed for his gun-hand, forcing it aside. He sank a fist in belly softness, and heard wind blast from the big man's mouth in an agonized gasp. Ute Cross bent, and a knee in his face slammed him back to the floor. Link swung clear and jumped at his companion.

He saw a gun tilt at him, heard its sharp explosion, and felt burning powder sear his cheek. Link ducked his head instinctively and butted the man in the face. He felt him go back a step and pounded at him with both fists. A furrow of hot pain was plowed along the side of his face as a swung gun barrel just missed his skull. Link wrenched himself loose, shook his head to clear it, and risked a quick backward look.

He saw Ute Cross lift himself, mumbing curses from a smashed mouth, and start his way. The man in front was swinging his gun for another shot, lips skinned back savagely from his teeth. Lew Mervyn bent low, scuttled for the door. Cross tripped him, and he staggered into the arms of the girl, who screamed and clawed at him.

Link Layden looked down the muzzle of the gun tilting at him, and thought grimly that twenty-one was a hell of an age to die. He slid one foot forward, hoping to lean into a bullet he couldn't possibly avoid, stay erect and do a little more damage before he was finished. Then he saw the man behind the gun jerk abruptly. Another weapon whiplashed from somewhere near by. The man spilled fast, pitching on his face at Link's feet.

He swung toward Ute Cross and saw the big man drop his gun. It clattered on the floor and Hamp Rodger's outlaw segundo lifted his hands, face twitching in bitter resignation.

Pat Wickman's senior deputy was in the kitchen doorway, powdersmoke still curling from the muzzle of his weapon. Pat himself, slight and gray, came fast through the front door.

"Quite a fight, boy," he said dryly. "Hated to stop it, but I don't think the man's been born yet who can tackle two guns barehanded and come out alive."

IT SEEMED then that the whole town had gathered outside of the Ace High. The story of what had happened spread quickly, and Link

had his back enthusiastically slapped as he pushed through the crowd, following Pat Wickman and his prisoners to the jail. It was lucky, somebody said, that Pat and his other deputies had come back to town at such a time, but it was clear where the credit should go.

Link found it wasn't hard to agree, to forget what else had happened, and to convince himself he could have handled both of these hardcases, if left alone. And it graveled him that Pat and the other deputies at the jail didn't give him the town's kind of praise.

Pat settled wearily in the swivel chair at his desk. His eyes were red-rimmed and tired. Link walked up to him, boot heels hitting the floor aggressively,

"Got something on my mind," he said brusquely. "After setting Ute Cross up for you, I think it's time I'm given some real work to do, Pat —and a badge to wear."

The sheriff grunted. He put both hands on his desk and leaned forward, eyes boring coldly into Link Layden.

"Maybe I should have waited a minute longer before stopping that fight at the Ace High," he said. "Some men take a beating better than they take praise for something they don't deserve. Me and the boys have been hid out along the street for more than a week, watching that restaurant around the clock. Knew Ute would make a try at springing Hamp, and as soon as that redheaded charmer hit town I knew, too, she'd have a part in it. She was too pretty for a hash-slinger, too well-dressed, and —well, she could do a damned sight better than you, Link, if it was a man

she wanted. It all added up."

Link stared in confusion, trying to understand that the sheriff's appearance hadn't been an accident. He had been there all the time.

"I thought you and the others were out of town!" he protested. "Somebody could have told me—"

"No," Pat said flatly. "You had your eyes too full of red hair for me to trust you. You had too many fool notions about law work in your head. To toll Ute into town, I had to make it seem that me and the others were away. I had to let him see a deputy without a badge or gun. Ute didn't believe that—not completely—but he had to cover up as a sheepherder and come for a look, anyway.

"I thought you'd pull your head out of the clouds, Link, and get some savvy before the break came—understand that I'm not idiot enough to leave my town wide open, and play your own part, if there was one, accordingly. I thought you'd notice that I had the street cleared tonight after Ute rode in, and that you wouldn't do anything foolish, trusting in me to take care of you."

The words were quietly spoken, but they stung.

"You used Mervyn and me as bait for a trap," Link said. Pat nodded.

"I figured I could move fast enough to grab Ute and still pull you two out," he said.

"And," Link went on, "you could have, too. Hell, you could have handled it better if I had gone out with that girl!"

"That's about it," the sheriff agreed. "I'm not taking anything away from you, boy. You're the first one who ever knocked Ute off his feet. You've got sand and you're a fighter. But you've got to learn fast that being a good lawman doesn't mean piling into a reckless fight. And you've got to learn, too, not to grab credit you don't deserve."

Link drew a long, unsteady breath.

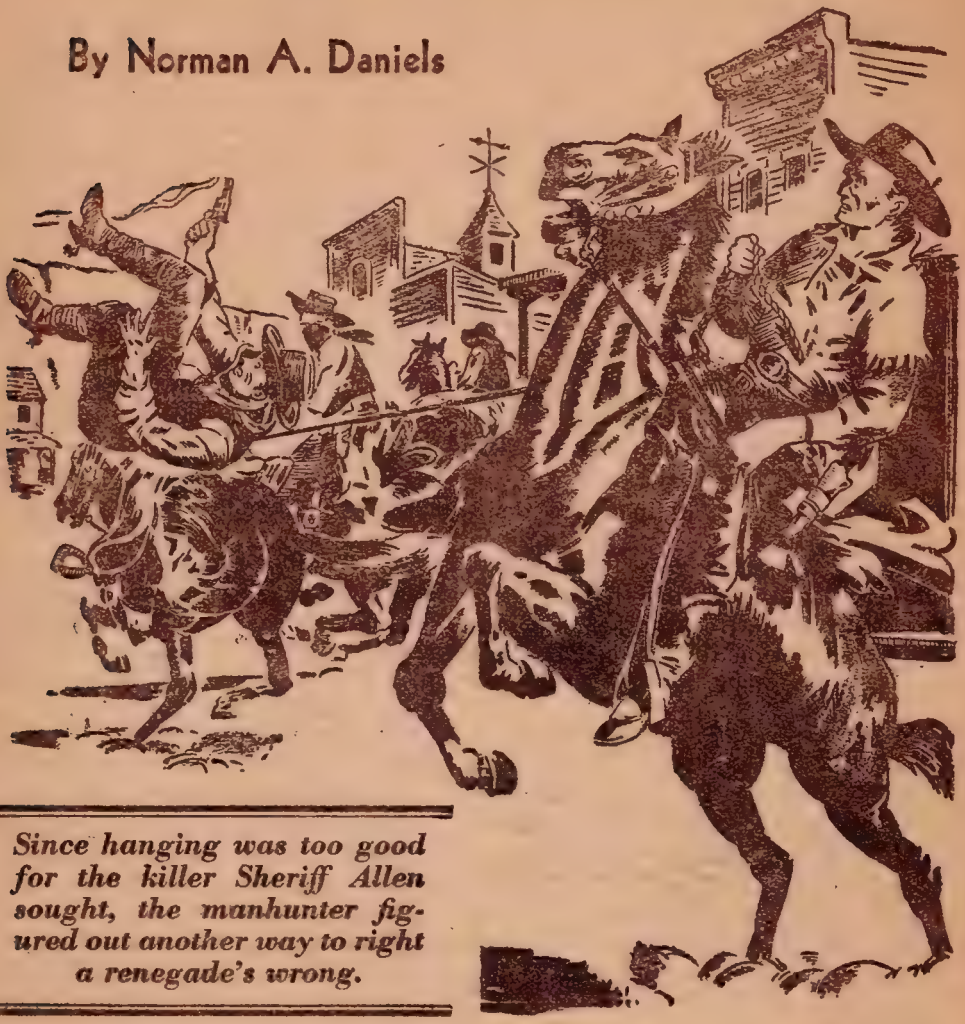
"I'm just a plain damned fool," he said quietly. "The girl had me wrapped so tightly around her finger I couldn't see anything else. I didn't even see those horses at the hitch-rail, though Ute told you I did—and I've been taking credit for that, too. I just turned around to tell Mervyn to head back to the jail by himself. I was going along with Tessie. Pat, all I've been able to see in this job was a badge on my chest, a gun at my side, and the right to strut the street. I want that badge now more than I've ever wanted it, but I'm going to get out of here and stay out—"

"Until tomorrow morning, anyway," the sheriff agreed, smiling suddenly. He opened his desk drawer and brought out something which had the shine of new silver. "Link, once in every man's life, if he amounts to anything, he's got to admit he's a damned fool, go back to taw and start over again. Now you've done that, I think maybe we can make a lawman out of you. Take this thing, boy. We'll go over to the Pioneer and have a couple of drinks to take some of the newness off of it."

Link pinned the badge on carefully. He looked down at the silver gleam on his chest and felt a strong rush of pride. He was a lawman now, the real thing. But, he told himself sternly, if Pat still needed someone to sort *Wanted* posters and take Mervyn out for his meals, he was going to be first in line to fight for the job.

Swing the Lariat High

By Norman A. Daniels



Since hanging was too good for the killer Sheriff Allen sought, the manhunter figured out another way to right a renegade's wrong.

THERE was moonlight enough to make his law star glitter. Thad Allen, sheriff on the prowl, rode leisurely across the grazing land with that yellow light in the distance as his target. He was lean and stern-faced. Some folks wondered when he'd smiled last. He wore two guns, their belts crossed and the holsters tied down. He rode straight in the saddle of the dun gelding, eyes never moving from the yellow light that grew from a single pin point to three separate sources. It was a one-story wooden building with three brightly lighted windows facing Thad Allen's way.

He'd been here before. He knew that the stage from Rocking Creek stopped here to change horses and allow the passengers to freshen up and eat and drink a little. Thad Allen also knew that on this stage was a man he wanted. Both as sheriff and as an

individual. He wondered if he'd kill him on sight.

Elmo Fraser deserved it. He rated anything Thad Allen could do to him and the worst would hardly be full payment for his sins. Thad circled the place until he was certain the stage hadn't come in yet. Then he removed the law star from his flannel shirt, slipped it into a pocket beside his sack of makings, and dismounted at the hitchrack in front of the place.

It was a combination restaurant and saloon, depending for its business mainly on the stage line. Occasional line riders or roving waddies stopped there now and then. The owner was a bushy-browed, burly man who'd once made his living wrestling in St. Louis. Now his only exertion was pouring whisky out of a bottle.

Thad opened the creaky door, walked casually up to the bar and ordered whisky. There were two cowhands silently drinking. No one paid him much heed. He sipped the whisky. This was no time to feel alcohol. Elmo was a sidewinder but not a coward.

IT HAD been almost seven years since Thad had seen the man, but he'd know him. He was certain of that. If seventy years had passed, he still would have known him. Elmo Fraser was as much a part of Sheriff Thad Allen as the faint scar that ran down beside Thad's right eye. But Elmo Fraser was a canker growing on Thad's heart. He was a malformation that could be removed only when Elmo was removed from the face of the earth.

Thad heard the creaking and the pounding of the stage, heard it come to a grinding stop with set brakes. Then there were voices. He raised his eyes to the mirror which reflected the doorway. Thad's right hand moved off the bar, the fingers were talonlike, every muscle was tense.

A white-mustached, white-haired man barged in first. Behind him came a somber-looking man in a frock coat and a high hat. Then a girl entered. She was small, very blond, and heavily made up. Undeniably she was pretty but with the kind of beauty that is appreciated more in a dance hall than a home.

Behind her came Elmo. He hadn't changed except that his shirt was silk, his vest of the finest velvet, and hand-carved boots were shined until they gleamed. He still had that smooth-skinned babyish face that was almost too handsome to be real. He wore sideburns that came far down. They were touched with gray at the very bottom. He was still slim and carried himself well.

Elmo Fraser paid no heed to Thad Allen. He stepped up to the bar and slapped it with his hand. "Whisky for all," he ordered. "And leave the bottles uncorked. The lady will have champagne which I know you haven't got. But any good wine will do . . ."

Thad Allen turned until he faced Elmo. Thad's left elbow was on the edge of the bar, his right hand poised and ready. The blond girl saw him first and recognized the stance. She gave a cry and ran for shelter.

Elmo's handsome features clouded into a dark frown as he turned to see what had alarmed his lady friend. For a moment he stood, frozen in utter surprise. Then he very carefully reached for his glass of whisky.

"Hello, Thad," he said.

Thad's lips curled downward. "It's took me seven years, Elmo. They were long years, but now we meet again. There won't be another meeting, Elmo. We have business to tend to. It's waited too long. Put down the drink an' reach."

Elmo tipped the glass, swallowed its contents and passed two fingers daintily across his mouth. "Thad, you're a fool," he said. "I'm not armed. You carry a grudge too long. You think I harmed you. Maybe I did, but that wasn't my fault. Now you want to kill me. Well, go ahead and shoot. Make it murder — because that's what it will be."

Thad said, "Reckoned you'd never

draw. An' you figger I won't, on a man who won't shoot back. Well, you figgered right, but you didn't figger deep enough."

THAD reached into his shirt pocket, brought out the law star and pinned it on. He said, "You're under arrest, Elmo. You happen to be the leader of that wild bunch that's been stickin' up stage coaches, banks, an' bars. You stay out of towns where you might be recognized. You ride the stage but leave it near a town, rent horses an' ride around the town an' pick up the stage on the other side. You were intendin' to do that now an' it's why I came here."

Elmo's smile died away. He drew in his underlip and chewed on it awhile. "So you got yourself a badge," he said finally. "An' I'm wagerin' you got it only to take me in like this on a charge that won't hold up in court. Sure—that's it! You want me to draw so you can gun me down an' say I resisted bein' arrested. That makes it nice an' legal for you, Thad. But I ain't no outlaw, an' I ain't been stickin' up no stages or banks."

"Turn around," Thad said grimly. "Put your hands behind your back. I'm tyin' them up an' then we're ridin'."

"You're either a fool," Elmo thundered, "or a smart murderer who wants to kill an' not get the rope for it. I'll go with you. I'll prove I'm no outlaw—"

Elmo started to turn. His right hand swung around to his front. Thad saw the shoulder move. The sheriff's right arm moved too. A .45 Colt roared once and a bullet whizzed by Elmo's head. He promptly raised both arms very high.

Thad laughed. "You'll never change, Elmo. You won't draw on a man when he faces you, but you'll try a fast shot when he don't expect it. Put your hands behind your back."

Thad had a short length of light, strong rope ready and he quickly tied Elmo's wrists. Then he whirled the man about, opened his coat and pulled two small but deadly pistols from his belt. He flung them over the bar.

Elmo said, "Annie—Annie, come here."

The girl approached reluctantly and cautiously, watching Thad every moment. He made no move to stop her.

Elmo laughed with forced gaiety. "Annie, can't you see this is all a mistake? That sheriff hates my guts. Remember I told you about that girl I married seven years back? Well, she was the sheriff's girl then, but I took her away from him."

Annie gulped. "The—the one who—who died?"

"How many wives do you think I had?" Elmo laughed. "Of course, the one who died."

"The one you killed," Thad broke in. "You courted her away from me. You made her think nobody in the world was as smart an' good. Then you killed her slow—by breakin' her heart. Because after you spent the money her father left her, you wanted out. Well, you got it then an' you got it now. This time it's permanent."

Elmo's smile became a sneer. "What are you goin' to do? Pretend I tried to escape an' shoot me in the back?"

"I don't have to do that," Thad said. "But after a jury an' a judge gets through with you, I'll be puttin' the law's rope around your neck. Now you can start walkin'."

"Annie," Elmo cried. "Annie, you know this ain't legal. I'll need your help. Come to see me. Come as fast as you can get there. We'll show this sheriff that a badge don't make the laws."

Thad pushed him hard and Elmo went staggering toward the door. Several times on the ride back, Elmo tried to talk, but Thad wouldn't reply. He let the outlaw ride a dozen paces ahead and the distance between the two men never changed.

THEY rode, finally, down the busy street of Campers Creek. Thad's office and jail were at the opposite end. Cowhands and townspeople streamed out to see the prisoner.

Old Matty Callahan, Thad's deputy, proudly related the trap Thad had set. "This here skunk's been raidin' stages an' banks an' saloons for more'n a year. Wears a mask an' leads a whole gang. But the mask slipped one time an' Thad got hisself a good idee what this hombre looked like. Didn't take him long to recollect ain't but one man who could look so much like a dude. Thad began investigatin'. I helped him some."

"What'd you do, Matty, saddle up for him?" someone called.

"I rid with him. I was there when he learned this sidewinder stayed out o' towns an' rid aroun' 'em."

"How many folks this hombre killed?" someone else queried.

"Don't rightly know for sure." Matty Callahan enjoyed being important. "Guess maybe five or six. We know he shot a man in the back last April down at Gilmore Mesa. Guess nobody'll ever know how many he drygulched."

"Sounds to me," someone else yelled loud enough for Thad and Elmo to hear, "like mebbe a rope party's in order. Skunks like him ain't got no right to go on breathin'."

Thad rode on, neither looking to the right nor the left. He had no desire to start bowing like a hero. This was just another job, although one that gave him a full measure of personal satisfaction. He untied Elmo when they were inside the office and then led him to a cell.

Elmo said, "Thad, you're makin' a big mistake. It'll be one you can't undo if that mob gets in the right mood and some galoot shows 'em a rope. Or maybe that's what you're hankerin' for?"

"Maybe." Thad closed the door and turned the key.

"Maybe the only reason you brought me back is so that I'll be lynched. Then, even if it's a mistake, you can crawl out by sayin' it wasn't your fault. Thad, I'm thinkin' you're goin' to try an' murder me legal."

"If it's legal, it ain't murder," Thad said brusquely. "It won't be done no other way. I'll have some chow sent in later."

"Thad." Elmo was gripping the bars so hard that his knuckles gleamed. "Thad, if Annie comes you'll let her see me?"

"Ain't no reason I shouldn't," Thad replied. He slammed the main cell door, went over to his desk and sat down. Feet propped against the edge of the desk, he slowly manufactured a cigarette and lit it. He puffed deeply, letting the smoke circle around his face while he thought things over.

It was true that he had little evidence against Elmo. There was only one witness who might recognize him and even if this witness did, Elmo would bring in a dozen people who'd swear he was miles away. Thad knew that Elmo was the bandit. Knew he'd killed and in a cowardly fashion, but what Thad knew and what he'd be allowed to tell a jury were two different things.

He'd more than half hoped that Elmo would draw even before he knew Thad was a peace officer. He should have known better, Thad chided himself. Elmo never took chances. When he opened fire his victim never had the slightest chance.

ALMOST an hour later Annie, with the golden hair, walked belligerently into the office and demanded to see Elmo. Thad opened the main door, watched her reach through the bars for Elmo's hands, and kiss him soundly. Thad pulled over a chair so he could observe them, although he couldn't hear what they were whispering.

She didn't remain very long. "I'm registered at the hotel, and I'm staying here until Elmo is free and you've lost that badge which makes you too important for your britches, mister.

You been nursing a grudge against Elmo so long it's made you a little crazy. Him—an outlaw!"

She tilted her chin up and laughed sarcastically. Thad didn't reply. Ten minutes after she left, Matty Callahan, his deputy, came in. Matty seemed excited.

"I'm thinkin'," he said, "you better take this here skunk outa town. Seems a wrangler from one o' the towns which this here outlaw stuck up, has been tellin' the boys how two people got theirselves shot. There's a lot o' drinkin' goin' on an' if it goes much further, somebody's goin' to ask about a rope an' then they'll come for him, Thad."

"Let them," Thad said grimly.

"You mean, that's what you want? Son, I know what that sidewinder did to you. I know a rope is too danged good fer him, but you're the sheriff here. You can't let a blood-hungry mob take him. You jest can't do it, Thad."

"Can I stop fifty men—a hundred men?" Thad asked. "Shall I risk bein' killed too, so that a man I hate to hell an' back can live? No, Matty, I ain't that interested in protectin' a skunk like Elmo."

"You don't mean that," Matty shouted. "You know you don't, Thad. But if the boys come they'll be ugly an' you won't be able to stop 'em. Better get him out o' here an' fast."

"Go back an' let me know if they start assemblin'," Thad said. "We can't do much more'n that."

It was two hours later, around ten o'clock, that Thad heard the thud of marching feet. He jumped up and went to the door. About twenty or thirty men, in a close-packed group, were moving toward the jail. The man leading them held a rope, already noosed. They were close enough so that Thad could see all this.

He darted for the gun rack and took down a shotgun. He spilled shells onto the desk, stepped up to the door and opened it. He had the shotgun

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at his hip when the crowd stopped, twenty yards away.

"We're takin' him," the ringleader shouted. "If we got to kill you, sheriff, we'll do that too. Ain't no call you should die for a murderer like him."

"Move on," another man shouted. "What's the matter? You all got yella stripes? The sheriff ain't shootin'. He knows if he does we'll blast him. Get goin'."

THE crowd surged forward. Thad wondered where Matty was. He could use an ally right now. They came to the foot of the steps, men shrouded by shadows, wearing sombreros low and using handkerchiefs to cover their faces. They were a determined group.

Thad's finger left the trigger of the shotgun. If he fired, he might wound three or four of them, but he'd die in a hail of answering gunfire. It was stupid to oppose them, even if the prisoner had been someone he wanted to protect. As matters stood, Elmo had a good chance of escaping justice. These men would take care of that.

Thad said, "I ain't fool enough to think I can stand all of you off. But Elmo Fraser's got a right to a fair trial."

"We'll give him a fair trial," someone yelled. "He can do all his talkin' after we hoist him up. Sheriff, stand aside or we'll—"

Thad lowered the shotgun. "You men are makin' a mistake. If you lynch him, I'm goin' after each one of you. You can't cure murder with more murder."

The crowd surged forward then, as if by an unspoken signal. Thad was flung aside. In the melee the shotgun was ripped out of his hands and used as a club. He fell to his knees. Someone laughed harshly and kicked him under the jaw.

Matty Callahan held his head up when Thad opened his eyes again. Matty was showing the worry in his eyes.

"Thad, they like to killed you. How many was there? Did you see any of 'em?"

Thad sat up. "I thought you were comin' to tell me when the mob started their lynchin' bee."

"Lynchin'?" Matty gasped. "But Thad, them wasn't lynchers. The boys talked about stringin' him up, but I did some talkin' too, an' they got real peaceable. Them that came here didn't lynch Elmo. They was his men —the owlhoots he rides with. It was a jail bust."

Thad got to his feet, staggered over to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. He dried himself, felt of his aching jaw, and then slowly removed the badge from his shirt. He placed it in the middle of his desk.

"Matty," he said, "you're in charge. Elmo escaped because I was scared to protect him. I figgered them hombres were lynchers. I had the drop on 'em. They'd respected a shotgun, but I let 'em through. I wanted Elmo lynched. An' because I forgot that I swore to protect people, as well as arrest 'em, my prisoner got loose."

"You givin' up the job?" Matty asked in awe.

"Yep. If I get Elmo, I'll come back an' explain what happened to 'em that made me sheriff. If they say I rate another chance, I'll pin the badge on again. But I won't come back at all unless I bring Elmo with me or watch him buried."

After Thad strapped on his guns, he made up a bedroll and loaded saddlebags with provisions. He selected his favorite rifle, carried it outside, and slid it into the saddle boot. He mounted, toed the gelding's rib lightly and the horse moved away at a fast pace.

Thad rode to the hotel, tied up the horse and went inside. He asked for the blond girl named Annie and was told she had checked out and had taken the stage east.

IN TWENTY minutes Thad overtook the stage, but he didn't stop it. He rode well behind, and at dawn

he was yawning hard but still on the trail. Annie got off at Elkhorn Forks and checked into another hotel. Thad rode on to the stable, arranged to have his gelding rubbed down and fed, and then he checked into the same hotel.

He rested fitfully, afraid that Annie would disappear while he was asleep. Soon after dawn he fetched his horse and sleepily sat his saddle and waited. Annie was in no hurry until Thad saw a lanky man ride up to the hotel, go inside for a few moments, and come out alone. He rode off to the south and in a few moments Annie emerged. She walked very fast in the direction of the livery stable and apparently rented a two-seater. When she drove this off, Thad followed her. He wondered if his hopes were going to come true so quickly.

Annie hit the trail at high speed, using the whip often. She knew how to drive and she had a good horse. She raced down a trail into a canyon, along the bottom of it and then out again to head across flat prairie. There were majestic, rust-colored rocks on all sides, some of them very high and casting great shadows across the sunlit plains.

Thad remained as far behind as he dared and every now and then he had a glimpse of Annie. Not once did she look around. Thad wondered about that. Annie was, of course, going to meet Elmo. The rider who summoned her had been his messenger. All along Thad knew that it was Annie to whom Elmo had whispered his plan for escape and Annie who had carried it to Elmo's men. But when Elmo broke jail so cleverly, he automatically confessed that he was the masked leader of the gun gang. No innocent man would break jail.

Now Elmo would have to move very fast, before an organized hunt was started. Therefore he'd have to strike again—perhaps his final desperate act of violence to augment whatever loot he already had. Thad knew bandits would always try one last raid.

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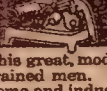

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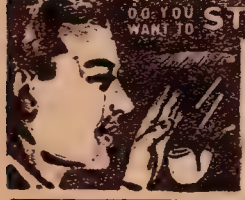

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Now Annie was running to Elmo and she should be suspicious enough at least to try to determine whether or not she was being followed. Thad frowned and reached for his rifle. He pulled it out of the saddle boot, held it with the stock resting against his knee, and brought the gelding down to a walk.

Annie was fleeing across open, level country now. Except for the massive rock formations, there was no place she could hide. Thad didn't have to remain close to her trail. He let her get almost out of sight before he took up the chase again. He knew this country and he wondered where she could be going. There were many miles to the next town in the direction she had taken. Much too far for a lone girl to travel in a buggy.

Thad's suspicions grew greater. He lost sight of her for ten minutes and when he spotted the carriage again it was standing still, the horse grazing on some stunted dry grass. Thad bit his lip, looked around carefully, but saw no signs of Annie.

He slapped the rump of the gelding, broke into a trot, and approached the apparently deserted carriage. He was within a dozen yards of it when the first shot came, flat and distant, but the bullet whizzed dangerously close to him.

THAD twisted in the saddle. He saw a puff of smoke from atop one of those flat rocks. He started to bring up the rifle. A stroke of lightning hit him in the back of the left shoulder. It sent him sagging out of the saddle. The gelding, alarmed by the shooting and the impact of that bullet, bucked once. Thad was hurtled out of the saddle. He got to his feet, wondering how badly he was hit. His rifle had flown off somewhere. He knew his six-guns could never have the range at which those killers were hidden.

Nevertheless Thad drew one of the guns. He was an open target without a place to hide. Very little grass high-

er than six inches. No gully, nothing. There were at least two rifle-armed gunmen firing at him and they had him well ambushed.

He held a hand to his left arm, felt the blood running down inside the sleeve. A bullet twanged past him and hit the ground. A second one was wilder, but the third hissed by his ear. They'd get him. He couldn't stop them. Thad looked for a spot where the grass was a little higher and found one. He raced toward it.

The riflemen tracked him with bullets. One nicked the calf of his right leg and threw him. He let himself pitch forward to land in the grass that grew a foot and a half tall. His sombrero slipped off his head finally. He seized it and threw it lightly so that it rested just below the grass and could be seen from any of those rocks which overlooked the level land.

Thad crawled slowly and painfully away from that sombrero. He had an idea it was going to become quite a target and he wasn't mistaken. If he'd been inside that hat, he'd have been hit a dozen times. At last the firing stopped. Thad parted reedy grass, raised himself slightly. He saw Annie and two men come from behind one of the rocks and ride toward town.

A third man, hidden behind a rock directly across the prairie, rode out fast. He held a rifle and he was heading toward the spot where they firmly believed Thad lay riddled. This gunman was going to make sure of the job.

Thad smiled grimly and gripped his six-gun tighter. He felt elated that he was at last going to be allowed to take an active part in this fight, not merely act as a target. The rider was cautious enough as he approached the fairly tall grass. He could see the sombrero but nobody near it. Rifle held ready, he dismounted and started toward the place afoot.

Thad couldn't have prayed for anything better. He knew that the sound of a shot would travel far across this flat country and be heard by Annie

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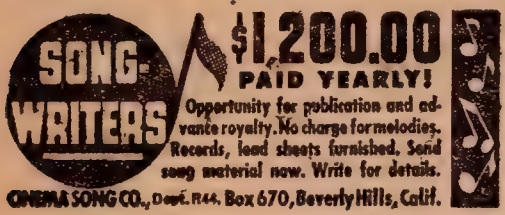

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and the men riding with her. Thad was determined that they must not be alarmed.

He had little use of his left arm, but he held a gun in his right. Held it by the long barrel as a club. The rifleman began kicking at the tall grass. He saw a trail of blood which Thad had left, and there was enough of it sprinkled on the grass to make him grow less cautious. He was passing within two yards of where Thad lay when the lawman leaped and swung the gun butt.

The rifleman tried to twist about and raise his gun, but Thad was too quick for that. A single blow ended the battle. Thad quickly disarmed the man, removed his purple-colored shirt, and put it on himself. He took the bandit's sombrero, his rifle, and then removed the unconscious man's boots.

Thad swung into the saddle of the bandit's pony, threw the boots away after he had traveled a full two miles. In half an hour he caught sight of Annie and the others. They were still riding hard and not waiting for him. He dropped back and was glad of it a few moments later, for a dozen outlaws rode out from the canyon pass to join Annie. Thad couldn't distinguish the identities of any of them, but he was certain that Elmo was there.

LEAVING the trail, Thad rode hard toward town. He knew he couldn't reach it in time to give an alarm, but he hoped to be in time to argue the matter with Elmo. As he neared the outskirts, he removed a lariat from the saddle, tested it briefly, and found it to be good rope.

Thad heard the shooting as he turned his borrowed pony down between two houses and brought the animal to a stop just before reaching the street.

The bandits had finished their work and were riding fast and hard. Leading them was Elmo. He wore a mask, but he hadn't bothered to change

clothes, and Thad knew he was making no mistake.

As Elmo approached, Thad began swinging the rope. He dug heels into the pony, shot out into the street, and threw the rope. It settled around Elmo before the bandit leader realized what happened. Thad braced his pony. The rope tightened. Elmo was plucked out of his saddle neatly.

Someone began shooting. Thad's six-gun flamed. These bandits were in a hurry. Men were already organizing pursuit. Thad turned his pony's head; the rope never went slack. Above the plunging of hoofs he heard Elmo screaming for help, but nobody stopped. It was every man for himself now.

Thad dismounted and watched Elmo painfully extricate himself from the rope. It was clear that the bandit leader didn't quite know what had happened. He'd lost his holstered gun somewhere and he got to his feet warily, keeping hands far away from his body.

Men were running up. The first of these recognized the fact that this was a personal battle. In a short time there was quite a crowd. Nobody said a word, no one breathed very hard.

Thad's left hand dropped to his gun butt and started drawing. Elmo let out a yelp of anguish.

"Give me a chance. I could have had you killed back at the jail, but I gave you a chance."

"Sure you did," Thad said. "A chance to be laughed at. Here—use this gun. I won't draw until you have picked it up and straightened yourself to shoot."

Thad threw the gun at Elmo's feet. The bandit leader looked down, then up at Thad. He licked his lips and the muscles in his throat were straining. He bent, reached for the gun on the ground with his left hand. Then he suddenly went into a crouch, and his right hand was holding a small gun he'd kept concealed somewhere beneath his vest.

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The small gun cracked. Thad's .45 bucked once. Elmo screeched, fell backward, and stayed there. Thad limped forward and kicked away the pair of guns on the ground.

A man with a marshal's star stepped up. "I'm thankin' you, sheriff," he said. "Sure I recognize you, Thad Allen. But I ain't lettin' you take this coyote back to your town. No siree. Him an' his gang shot down two people here, an' somebody's goin' to swing for it."

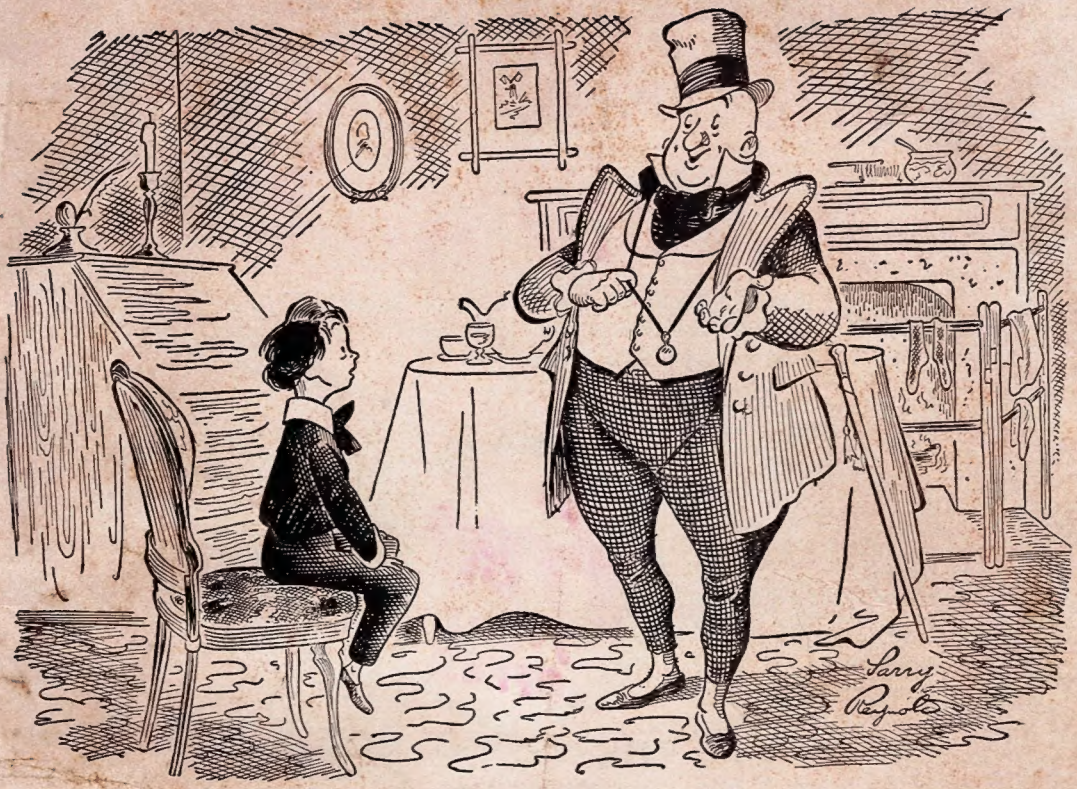
Thad nodded. "That's good enough for me. An' I feel better about the whole thing, because if I hang him it won't be a legal hangin'. It'll be murder, because I want to kill him so bad. He's all yours."

Thad submitted to being treated by the local doctor. He had three bullet holes in him, none very serious, but they pained plenty as he rode back home. He walked into the saloon and stepped up to the bar. Off in a corner Matty Callahan was smirking over his glass.

The bartender pushed a bottle across the bar. Then he opened the cash drawer and slid a shiny object toward Thad.

"You dropped this, sheriff. Guess the pin needs fixin'. You got to be careful about them things. Man don't want to lose the badge he'll probably wear the rest of his life."

Thad smiled happily and pinned on the badge. It belonged there on his vest. The people of his district forgave him. They all knew that a man's personal hate can become so bitter that his whole character changes. There wouldn't be a second time. They knew that and so did Thad.



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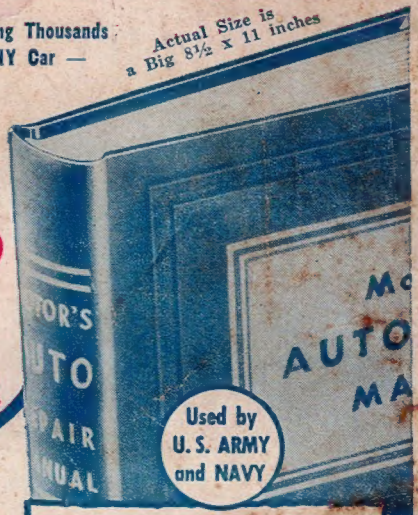

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